

HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY



R01028 91944

The Rocking-Chair

An American Institution



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

https://archive.org/details/bwb_S0-ACB-253



A splendid comb-back Windsor rocking-chair of 1790-1800 date. Note how the legs are turned down to a point and set into the thick rockers. The long, slender spindles are continuous, extending through the back rail to the comb head-piece. Owned by Mrs. Harlan Mendenhall

The Rocking-Chair: An American Institution

by
Walter A. Dyer
and
Esther Stevens Fraser



Published by The Century Co.

New York and London

111120

ROL 0289 1944

Copyright, 1928, by
THE CENTURY CO.

First printing May, 1928

NOT A BOOK
BUT A JOURNAL

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Much of the material offered in the following pages, both text and photographs, appeared originally in the magazine "Antiques," of which Mr. Homer Eaton Keyes is editor.

CONTENTS

PART I

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

By ESTHER STEVENS FRASER

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE ORIGIN	3
II CONVERTED TYPES	20
III TRUE ROCKING-CHAIRS—EARLY EXPERI- MENTAL TYPES	33
IV PAINTED WINDSOR ROCKING-CHAIRS	48
V LATER TYPES	57

PART II

THE BOSTON ROCKER

By WALTER A. DYER

VI AN ELUSIVE TRAIL	69
VII THE EMERGENCE OF THE BOSTON	81
VIII THE LATER BOSTONS	92
IX SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS	102

CONTENTS

PART III

ADDENDA

	PAGE
SOME NOTES ON STENCIL DECORATIONS, BY E. S. F.	113
ADVERTISEMENTS	122
CHAIR-MAKERS IN 1831	124

ILLUSTRATIONS

A splendid comb-back Windsor rocking-chair of
1790-1800 date *Frontispiece*

PLATE	FACING PAGE
1A Pennsylvania six-slat arm-chair with ball- turned stretcher	5
1B Pennsylvania slat-back chair of about 1800, with cradle-shaped rockers added later .	5
1C Pennsylvania slat-back chair of about 1800, with rockers added about 1840 . . .	5
2 On the left, a simple slat-back chair of a type common in Maine. Date about 1790. On the right, a much earlier slat-back, the well-defined turning indicating 1700-1720	8
3 The banister-back chair on the left dates about 1730, but the rockers were added almost a century later. The chair on the right is of the more usual banister-back type, dating 1750-70, with short, rather shapeless rockers	12
4A Converted New England fiddle-back chair .	16

ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATE		FACING PAGE
4B	A graceful Philadelphia comb-back Windsor arm-chair of 1760-70 converted into a rocking-chair	16
5	Two late converted chairs—1825-30	21
6A	One of the earliest known examples of the true rocking-chair, a fiddle-back from Connecticut made about 1780	24
6B	Pennsylvania slat-back rocking-chair of about 1800	24
7	Two examples from Maine, of an experimental type of rocking-chair dating from 1780 to 1800	28
8	A typical Shaker slat-back rocking-chair of maple, made between 1825 and 1840	33
9	An old slat-back rocking-chair of unusual design which was made in Hartford, Conn., and traveled to the Pacific Coast and back by ox team, covered wagon, boat, and train	37
10A	Early Pennsylvania fan-back Windsor rocking-chair—1780-90	40
10B	A child's rocking-chair of early Sheraton fancy type, with cradle-shaped rockers	40
11A	A remarkable painted Windsor rocking-chair of about 1800, with bamboo turning and high framed back	44

ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATE		FACING PAGE
11B	Unusual painted rocking-chair with features of Sheraton fancy-chair derivation . . .	44
12A	A low-back "stepped" Windsor rocking-chair of about 1800-1810 . . .	49
12B	A comb-back Windsor rocking-chair of similar type and date	49
13A	Fine example of a comb-back "stepped" Windsor rocking-chair dating about 1800	52
13B	Comb-back Windsor rocking-chair of about 1820, showing the tendency toward a broader top slat	52
14A	Late comb-back with fine stenciling and arrow-shaped spindles of fancy-chair type .	57
14B	Late Windsor rocking-chair (1825-30) with writing-arm and broad, stenciled top slat	57
15A	A Pennsylvania rocking-chair of 1830 (Boston rocker period), painted a pale gray, with green and black stripes and gold leaf design	61
15B	A late New Hampshire type of painted comb-back rocking-chair, with features surviving from earlier forms	61
16	A splendid example of the cradle rocker, or rocking settee, of about 1830 (Boston rocker period)	64

ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATE

FACING PAGE

- | | | |
|-----|---|----|
| 17A | Rocking-chair of about 1830, of a type not uncommon in New York State and western New England | 72 |
| 17B | A more elaborate and graceful example of the same type, with stencil decoration | 72 |
| 18 | Abraham Lincoln's favorite rocking-chair | 77 |
| 19A | An example of the so-called Lincoln rocker, a type familiar to the Civil War generation | 81 |
| 19B | The Standard, stationary, patent, or spring rocker, which squeaked into popularity during the Elegant Eighties | 81 |
| 20 | High-back type of late Windsor rocker (about 1820), showing the emergence of Boston-rocker details—curved arms, bent spindles, and flat, broad head-piece | 84 |
| 21 | A splendid example of the early true Boston rocker (about 1825), with rolling seat, rolling crest, and fine stenciling | 88 |
| 22A | Stenciled Boston rocker of about 1830, made by Hitchcock, Alford & Co., with the early flat, rounded seat and straight spindles, but with a head-piece similar to later forms | 93 |
| 22B | A Boston rocker of about 1830, made of birch and whitewood, showing the rolling | |

ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATE		FACING PAGE
	seat and bent spindles in combination with the early scrolled head-piece	93
23A	Stenciled Boston rocker made about 1840 by Hitchcock, Alford & Co., with head- piece of a somewhat earlier type	96
23B	A later Boston rocker with cane seat, deco- rated with a design of naturalistic flowers, and with arms that form a continuous line with the front support	96
24A	Stenciled Boston (1845-50) with cane seat, unusual turnings, and very unusual head- piece reminiscent of earlier forms	101
24B	Commonest form of late Boston (about 1850), found in central Massachusetts	101
25A	Typical example of late Boston rocker (1845-50), with an elaborate and well- preserved landscape stenciled on the head- piece	104
25B	Stenciled Boston rocker with natural-wood arms, cane seat, and only six spindles, with a village scene on the head-piece	104
26	Two six-spindle Boston rockers of late date (after 1850), but with an early form of head-piece bearing stencil designs of the landscape type	108
27A	Simplest form of "little Boston" or "nursing	

ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATE

FACING PAGE

	chair," with rockers worn nearly through by use	116
27B	A "little Boston" stenciled with the fruit- and-scroll combination typical of the late period	116
28A	Typical example of the splat-back Boston common in the Middle West, with squared stiles	121
28B	Stenciled variant of the splat-back Boston, with two spindles and with arms and stiles continuous	121
29A	A splat-back Boston from Connecticut, made of maple and whitewood	125
29B	A curiosity—a rocking-chair of the Boston type with writing-arm and foot-rest	125

Part I

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

BY ESTHER STEVENS FRASER

NOTICE
Please do not write in this
book or turn down the pages

THE ROCKING-CHAIR:

AN AMERICAN INSTITUTION

CHAPTER I

THE ORIGIN

FOR many years we Americans have known rocking-chairs. As far back as I can remember, my father's favorite chair was a comfortable upholstered rocker—a bit shabby, perhaps, from constant use, but none the less suited to his liking. My father said that as far back as *he* could remember *his* father had sat in that chair. If the rocker had been of an earlier type, I should suspect that my grandfather might have enjoyed the old chair because of close association with *his* father.

In almost every family there is to be found some rocking-chair whose worn condition gives

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

evidence of its having been, for many years, the constant companion of some grandfather or grandmother. Old folks the country over have always had a certain chair, selected by them for their own particular comfort, which no one of a younger generation would think of occupying. Almost invariably it is a rocking-chair, though the type may vary from an early slat-back with short, snubby rockers to a wide-seated "Boston" equipped to swing in a generous arc.

My own great-grandmother's chair has just been handed down to me. I never knew her, because she died fifty years before I was born; and yet from her chair I can grasp something of her personality. In type it is the usual Pennsylvania rocking-chair, with cherry arms and rockers. What interests me is that, although cherry is one of the hard woods, those rockers were worn so flat that the services of a cabinet-maker were necessary to reshape them for further usefulness. Amazed at the flat hardwood rockers, I made inquiries, and learned that it was my great-grandmother's custom to sit in this chair while she put to sleep,

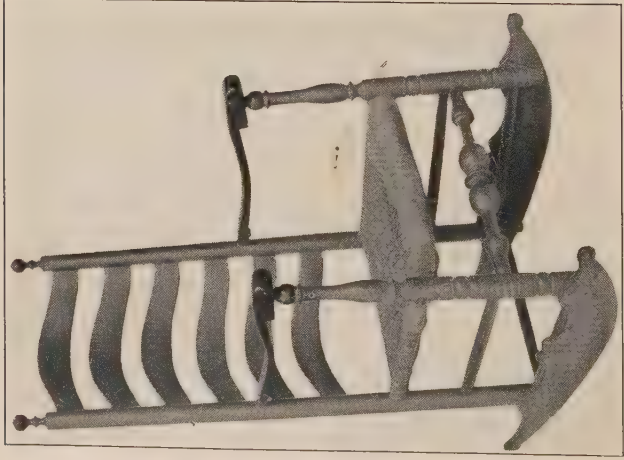


PLATE IA

Pennsylvania six-slat arm-chair with ball-turned stretcher. About 1760; rockers added about 1800.

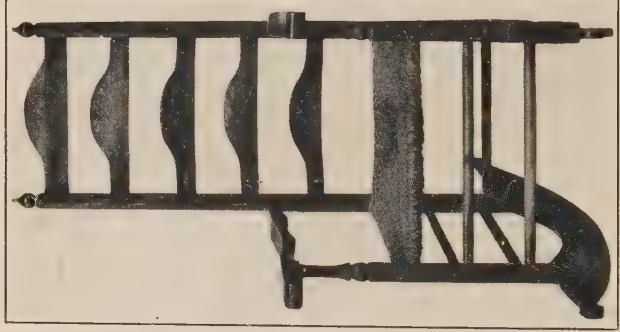


PLATE IB

Pennsylvania slat-back chair of about 1800, with cradle-rock.

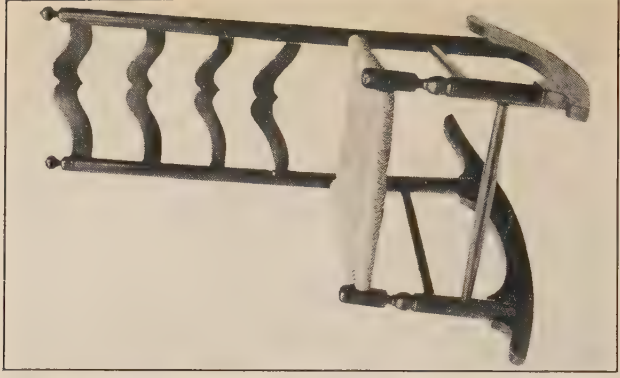


PLATE IC

Pennsylvania slat-back chair of about 1800, with rockers added about 1800.

THE ORIGIN

successively, each of her six babies. What a vivid picture of a patient and devoted mother is thus brought to our minds!

When Great-grandmother's chair came to me, it was painted and grained an inartistic golden-oak brown. For some time I debated what I should do, torn as I was between the desire to make it more attractive with a better coat of paint, and the equally strong desire to preserve the chair just as it had been in Great-grandmother's lifetime. Believing that the coat of grained painting could not be more than sixty or seventy years old, I examined the chair carefully for evidences of another coat of paint beneath. To my great joy, I found that Quaker gray had preceded this unattractive brown, and so I gathered courage for the task of careful scraping. As the work proceeded, green bands and black stripes began to show themselves, and curling leaves of gold such as are often found on similar Pennsylvania chairs. Such is the romance of old furniture! No one now living remembers seeing the rocker before it was painted brown, but Great-grandmother, look-

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

ing down from her oval gilt frame, seems to smile at the chair which has been given, once again, the appearance it had in her day.

Perhaps I have been unusually fortunate in having so many family associations with rocking-chairs. But I find numerous persons who agree with me that rockers preserve much more vividly than straight chairs the impression of personality. Those who have used one chair for years, unconsciously selected it in the first place because it was in accord with their personality, and through long years of use have molded that chair until it typifies them. It is astonishing how homelike the barest room becomes when a rocking-chair is placed by the fireside; just one adds the appearance of home comforts and good cheer. In Colonial and early American homes, particularly, the rocking-chair is most fitting, because it represents so distinctly the simple, sturdy home life of our pioneer ancestors.

So far, museums have ignored rocking-chairs as unworthy of their interest, and books on antiques have scarcely mentioned them in passing.

THE ORIGIN

If one does happen to be mentioned, we find our attention called to the fact that "of course the rockers are an addition of a later date." Many collectors absorbed in magnificent Philadelphia walnut and mahogany chairs have considered rockers unworthy of their notice; while other collectors who specialize in "Pilgrim Century" furniture have no interest in things that obviously date after 1750. Yet to many of us who are amateur collectors, the rocking-chair has a definite appeal, and we should enjoy delving into the mysterious past of this curiously American institution.

That it is an American idea we know beyond all shadow of doubt. We have had rocking-chairs, in this country, since 1774 at least, whereas no foreign rocker of a date prior to 1840 can be found. In fact, if we travel over the whole of Europe, we may come to our journey's end without seeing a single one. I am told by a friend that many years ago, when she was visiting in England, her hostess proudly pointed out a rocking-chair "that came from America." How it happens

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

that rockers were so popular in this country while Europe failed to be enthusiastic about them, we cannot say. It may be simply that they appealed to the energetic constitution of Americans. Or perhaps, owing to the rigors of pioneer life, stuffed chairs for the comfort of old folks could not be so easily provided as rockers.

Little as we actually know of its origin, we feel morally certain that some American *man* invented the rocking-chair for his personal use. Why? Because the men-folks particularly are partial to rockers! No wife who has furnished her living-room entirely in early American antiques need tremble longer when her husband complains that "there isn't a comfortable chair in the house." All she need do is to acquire one or two rocking-chairs for his use and the grumbling will cease. I know, because I have tried it!

Originally, the word "rocker" did not mean a chair. In the fourteenth or fifteenth century it was applied to the nurse who rocked the fretful or sleeping child in his cradle. Gradually it came to mean those two curved pieces of wood at the

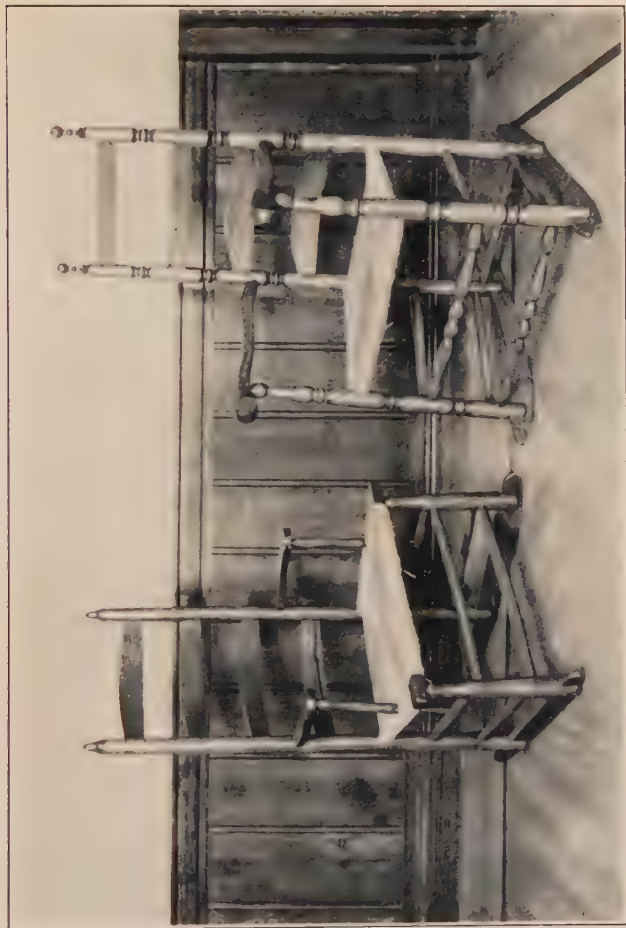


PLATE 2

On the left, a simple slat-back chair of a type common in Maine. Date, about 1790. On the right, a much earlier slat-back, the well-defined turning indicating 1700-1720. In each case the added rockers are of different wood. Courtesy of Jordan Marsh Company

THE ORIGIN

cradle base which permitted the rocking motion. Strangely enough, rockers were on cradles for three or four centuries before some ingenious American developed the simple idea of affixing them on chair legs.

History does not record who first put rockers on a chair, nor when the innovation took place, but tradition names Benjamin Franklin as the great American benefactor who invented the rocking-chair. Hoping to substantiate this tradition, I have read many biographies of Franklin, but with no success. Even his letters and his autobiography fail to prove that it was in his mind the rocking-chair idea was conceived. Yet if we were to consider all American men of inventive genius, we could not select any more likely candidate than Franklin. His many simple inventions and application of scientific phenomena are familiar to us. And we know that in 1787 Benjamin Franklin possessed for his own use a remarkable rocking-chair. When we read the description of it, we feel certain that he was its inventor.

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

Failing to find in any of the various Franklin biographies any mention of rocking-chairs, I turned to the reading of journals written by some of the great man's contemporaries. One of these records the experiences of the Rev. Manasseh Cutler, a pioneer minister of the Gospel who was later prominent in the political establishment of Ohio. Planning a trip to Philadelphia, the Rev. Mr. Cutler had been given a letter of introduction to Benjamin Franklin. On Friday, July 13, 1787, he presented this letter and spent the whole afternoon and evening with Dr. Franklin. The description of that call is of considerable length and gives us a vivid picture of the beloved philosopher in his own home. The following is only a fraction of Mr. Cutler's description:

After it was dark, we went into the house, and the Doctor invited me into his library, which is likewise his study. It is a very large chamber, and high studded. The walls are covered with bookshelves filled with books; besides there are four large alcoves, extending two-thirds of the length of the chamber, filled in the same manner. I presume this is the largest, and by far the best, private

THE ORIGIN

library in America. He showed us a glass machine for exhibiting the circulation of the blood in the arteries and veins of the human body. . . . Another great curiosity was a rolling press for taking the copies of letters or any other writing. A sheet of paper is completely copied in less than two minutes, the copy as fair as the original, and without effacing it in the smallest degree. It is an invention of his own and extremely useful in many situations in life. He also showed us his long artificial arm and hand, for taking down and putting books up on shelves which are out of reach and his great armed chair, with rockers, and a large fan placed over it, with which he fans himself, keeps off flies, etc., while he sits reading, with only a small motion of his foot; and many other curiosities and inventions, all his own but of lesser note. Over his manteltree, he has a prodigious number of medals, busts and casts in wax or plaster of Paris, which are the effigies of the most noted characters in Europe. . . . The Doctor seemed extremely fond, through the course of the visit, of dwelling on Philosophical subjects, and particularly that of Natural History, while the other gentlemen were swallowed up with politics. . . . Notwithstanding his age . . . his manners were perfectly easy, and everything about him seems to diffuse an unrestrained freedom and happiness. He has an incessant vein of humor, accompanied with an uncommon vivacity which seems as natural and involuntary as his breathing. He urged me to call on him again, but my short tarry would not admit. We took our leave at ten, and I retired to my lodgings.

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

Tantalizingly, Mr. Cutler just falls short of saying in actual words that Franklin originated this most amazing rocking-chair. Yet it is mentioned in the same sentence with "many other inventions all his own but of lesser note." Surely we may believe that herein lies almost conclusive proof that the tradition concerning Franklin's invention of the rocking-chair is based on fact.

Mr. Cutler does not tell us *how long* Franklin had had that chair. In the year 1787 it might have seen a number of years' service supporting the Doctor's heavy frame. How unfortunate it is that this early chair—which may have been the *first* on rockers—was not preserved for posterity! Franklin's library chair, with a seat that could be converted into a flight of steps, is still to be seen, in the rooms of the Philadelphia Philosophical Society, but the rocking-chair has disappeared. If only we could find it, and observe its style and construction, we might be able to say at what date Franklin put his chair on rockers. In the absence of evidence we may only conjec-

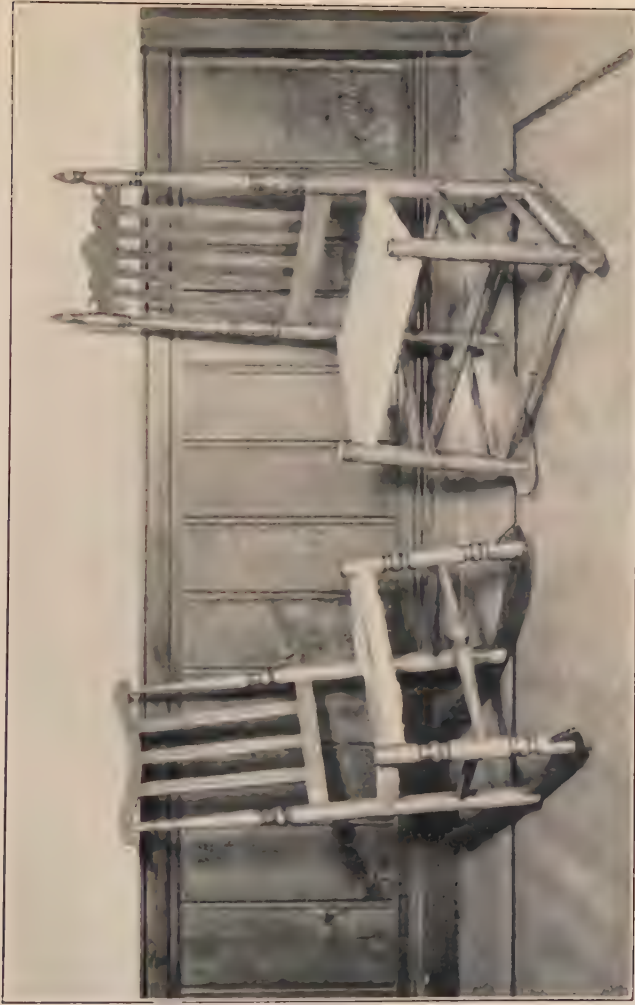


PLATE 3

The handicraft chair on the left dates about 1780, and the rockers were added a second century later. The chair on the right is of the more usual handicraft type, dating 1750-70, with almost shapeless rockers. Courtesy of Jordan Marsh Company

THE ORIGIN

ture that it was some time before the year 1757, when he started on his first mission to England as colonial agent for Pennsylvania.

Yet another rumor of Franklin's interest in rockers has just come to me. The story seems to ring true, but I must confess that at this writing time has been too short for me to obtain authoritative evidence. Personally I believe that the necessary proof will some day come to light, so I dare to repeat it here. The statement as reported to me is that some New England periodical published an account of Franklin's journey to Boston shortly before the Revolution. According to the paper, he was then engaged in the task of setting up milestones along the post-roads used by mail-coaches. It is said that at this time Franklin had a blacksmith experiment with the making of iron rockers for chairs because the wooden ones were so subject to splitting.

Let us analyze this report. While Franklin was deputy postmaster-general for the British colonies in America, he did travel to Boston, seeing that milestones were properly placed

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

along the post-roads. All of the biographies tell us that this was in the year 1763, which was, certainly, before the Revolution. These points of the report are in accordance with well-known historical facts. Why, then, should we doubt the remainder of the paragraph? That in the midst of all his duties Franklin should have stopped to improve upon, and eliminate the one fault in, his original rocking-chair idea, may seem cause for wonder. But his scientific mind, always ruminating upon the development of some improvement, would act immediately when a new idea came to him. Those who have read his letters know that wherever he went, he was interested in furniture and frequently sent back to Mrs. Franklin different pieces that he had purchased.

In Smythe's biography of Franklin we read that while on this sixteen-hundred-mile journey to New England he suffered injuries in a fall. This might easily have turned his thoughts once more to the comforts of a rocking-chair. As such

THE ORIGIN

chairs were certainly a rarity in New England at that time, he would have been obliged to have one made for him. And if one was being made, why not try to improve it by finding some more durable kind of rockers? By some such process of reasoning I find myself thoroughly convinced that Franklin did experiment with iron rockers.

On his return to Philadelphia, he wrote a letter to his nephew, Jonathan Williams of Boston, in which he acknowledges the receipt of a chair. How we should like to know if this was a rocking-chair, perhaps the one to which the experimental iron rockers had been added! Who knows?

Supposing, for the sake of argument, that Franklin did develop the iron rocker idea in 1763, we may then believe that the wooden rocker was originated sometime previous to that date. There are some collectors who have given much thought to the subject and yet believe that the first rocking-chair was made as far back as the late seventeenth century, gaining but slowly in popularity. They think that an occasional rocking-chair of

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

the early eighteenth century is still to be found.

Supporting this belief is a banister-back arm-chair on rockers, known to have been in a certain family since 1725. The present owner—who knows antique furniture well—at first believed the amusingly shaped rockers to have been part of the original construction. On the other hand, an expert, whose opinion is not often questioned, pronounced the rockers a later addition, and the owner had them removed. Had I seen the chair before that, I might be able to add my personal opinion, but unfortunately I did not hear of the interesting controversy until after the rockers were taken off.

It seems to me—and I think there are others who believe as I do—that the rocking-chair idea, once demonstrated, was so appealing and so practical that its development must have been rapid. I do not see how the idea of a chair on rockers could have originated as far back as 1725 and progressed so slowly that no unquestionably authentic example of such a chair now exists as



PLATE 4A

Converted New England fiddle-back chair. The block-turned legs place it about 1740. Courtesy of Jordan Marsh Company



PLATE 4B

A graceful Philadelphia comb-back Windsor arm-chair of 1760-70 converted into a rocking-chair. Courtesy of J. J. Shay

THE ORIGIN

proof. If the rocking-chair was invented in 1725, where are the early experimental specimens of that time—or of 1740 or 1750? We have never seen one example. All rocking-chairs dating in style earlier than 1770 are obviously converted. And the true rocking-chairs that date from 1770 to 1790 are not so plentiful as to confirm the belief that chairs had been on rockers for fifty years or more.

I have been hunting for documentary proof for the earliest mention of rocking-chairs in anything written or printed. So far as my personal observation goes, the earliest known use of the word "rocking-chair" is in a hand-written bill from William Savery, a well-known cabinet-maker of Philadelphia, which will some day be published. On February 11, 1774, he charges Mrs. Mary Norris "to bottoming a rocking chair, one shilling tenpence."

Two important points are to be noted in connection with this bill. In the first place, Savery was *reseating* a rocking-chair, from which fact

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

we assume that this chair had seen sufficient use to require new rushing. So it could not have been a *new* chair. We must admit the possibility that originally it was constructed as a straight chair and used in that form for several years by Mrs. Norris before being supplied with rockers. It is impossible to say whether this rocking-chair was five, ten, or even twenty years old when it came to William Savery for reseating. But, granting that it was one of the earliest chairs on rockers, we are still free to believe that Franklin invented the rocking-chair sometime in the vicinity of 1760.

The other interesting fact to be observed is that the bill in question is from a prominent Philadelphia cabinet-maker to a Philadelphia matron of high social standing. This tends to support the tradition of Franklin's authorship, since the earliest record of a rocking-chair shows it to have been first used in that city over whose populace the good Doctor held benign sway. How strange it is that the Philadelphia chair-makers,

THE ORIGIN

who had already gained the enviable reputation of making the best chairs in the country, should not have thought of this simple little invention of a chair on rockers! With what amazing rapidity the story of a rocking-chair must have spread through the different little chair shops throughout the city!

CHAPTER II

CONVERTED TYPES

ALL rocking-chairs are divided quite naturally into two classes—those which were originally straight chairs and were subsequently converted, and those which were designed to have rockers and never have known an existence without them.

Many Pennsylvania slat-back chairs with big ball-turned stretchers appear to have been converted into rocking-chairs in the period between 1770 and 1780. Some of these have high cradle-shaped rockers, nicely scrolled as a Pennsylvania cabinet-maker was wont to turn them out. Having seen many of these early chairs—all so similar—I have come to believe that they are of a period close to that in which the rocking-chair was invented. So far I have not found one of that type which seemed to have been originally a



PLATE 5

Two late converted chairs—1825-30. On the left, a child's Hitchcock from which the ball feet have been removed in adding the rockers. Owned by Esther Stevens Fraser. On the right, a typical New Hampshire arrow-back chair with free-hand painted decoration in red, yellow, and green. Courtesy of Mrs. Katharine Bryce.

CONVERTED TYPES

rocking-chair. Among those which date about 1800—and have a small front stretcher instead of the massive Queen Anne turning—have been found several which I believe to be true rocking-chairs.

The converted types may, of course, range from the very earliest kinds of chairs to the latest. There was no date at which the converting of rocking-chairs ceased. If a chair was a favorite, and its possessor desired rockers for greater comfort, that chair was converted instead of being displaced by a new rocking-chair. Our ancestors were thrifty folk, and for those of them who lived in remote towns it was not easy to obtain new chairs.

We may assume that most rocking-chairs antedating the year 1800 were converted. Between 1800 and 1810 many Windsor-chair shops turned out numbers of nicely made inexpensive chairs, and "fancy-chair" shops did the same. At that time, I believe, rocking-chairs began to be constructed and marketed in sufficient quantities to be easily obtainable in furniture stores. In a New

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

York Directory for the year 1810 I find an advertisement of a fancy-chair manufactory which lists rocking-chairs in its output as if they were no novelty.

My belief that before 1800 the conversion of straight chairs was more general than the constructing of true rocking-chairs is supported by an old ledger kept by Daniel Ross, a cabinet-maker of Ipswich, Massachusetts. This ledger begins November 16, 1781, and continues until 1815, recording every piece of work that Ross and his assistant, Jeremiah, did between those dates. The first item of any interest to us is dated September 26, 1785: "Putting rockers to a chair, one shilling sixpence." This entry is duplicated on March 16, 1790, again in February, 1793, June, 1795, July, 1800, and August, 1801, after which time we fail to find any mention of converting chairs into rockers. Though Daniel Ross made many chairs and sets of chairs, nowhere in the book do I find one mention of the construction of a rocking-chair. Noticing the lapse of five years between the first two conversions, we may natur-

CONVERTED TYPES

ally conclude that the rocker idea was spreading but slowly in Ipswich at that time.

There were several Windsor-chair manufactories in Salem, and others, doubtless, in Haverhill and Newburyport, which by the year 1800 and after must have been supplying Windsor rockers to the residents of Ipswich. Quantity production in these shops enabled them to produce a good article for very little money. With rocking-chairs so easily obtainable, why should Daniel Ross have been asked to continue the converting of straight ones?

It is sometimes difficult to differentiate between a converted and a true rocking-chair, without scraping it down to the wood. Many points have to be considered. The legs should be examined first for evidences of having been cut down to accommodate the rockers. Sometimes the spacing of side stretchers—if the lower one comes too near the rocker, for instance—tells us that the chair has been converted. Then, too, if the rockers are of a different wood, with fewer layers of finish than the rest of the chair, we know

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

they were supplemental. This is where we may learn much from the careful removal of coats of paint and shellac. When we find two or three layers of paint on the rockers, and several older underlying coats of paint and shellac on the main body, it is safe to assume that the rocking-chair is a converted one.

Some persons feel that if a rocking-chair has side stretchers, it must be a converted and not a true rocking-chair. This seems to be carrying our point too far. While undoubtedly a rocking-chair without side rungs is a true type, we know of many later true rocking-chairs, including the Bostons, that did have side stretchers. (See Plates 6B, 9, et al.) It is our belief that in the early days of rockers, chair-makers did not realize that side stretchers could be omitted without lessening the stability of a chair. On most of the early true rocking-chairs these side stretchers remain, to cause argument and confusion among those persons who disbelieve in an early origin for rockers. For proof as to whether a chair is a converted or a true type, we would place greater stress on evi-

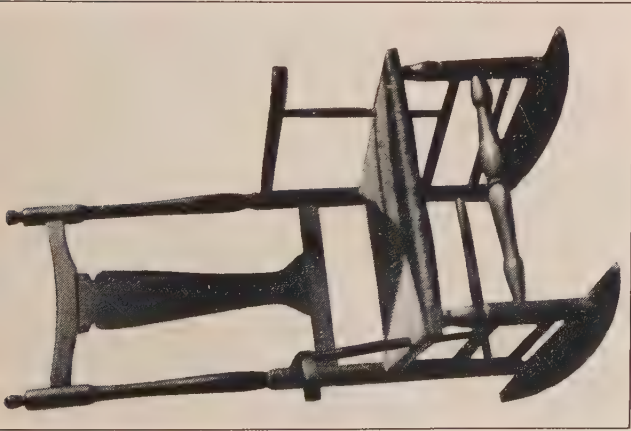


PLATE 6A

One of the earliest known examples of the true rocking-chair, a fiddle-back from Connecticut made about 1780. Owned by Henry H. Taylor.

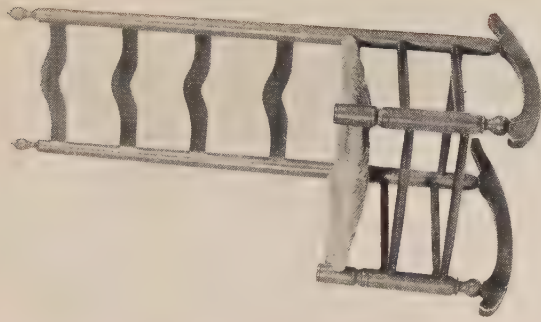


PLATE 6B

Pennsylvania slat-back rocking-chair of about 1800. The turning of the feet shows it was not converted. Owned by Mrs. Henry V. Weil



CONVERTED TYPES

dence that the legs were originally designed to go with rockers. This means that all shaping of the leg must have been done before it left the turning-lathe. A leg that is sawed off or whittled down is indisputable proof of conversion.

There are several types of rockers, and different methods of attachment. In general, I should say that the early rockers are short and snubby, extending an *equal* distance beyond the front and the rear legs. It is also to be observed that in the case of these early rockers, the shaping of each end is identical; the silhouette as viewed from the side is perfectly balanced. High, cradle-shaped rockers, thin knife-blade rockers (the two kinds that are set into sockets cut out of the chair legs), and flat, thick rockers into which an altered leg is set—all these are shaped the same back and front and extend an equal distance. This is doubtless due to the custom of making such rockers for cradles, where disaster might occur if the rocker were not balanced on its middle point.

As to when rockers began to be extended several inches more in the rear, we are a little un-

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

certain. I should guess in the period between 1810 and 1815. Some Windsor comb-back rocking-chairs dating from 1800 to 1810 were made with equidistant rockers—but not so the Boston rocker! By 1825 it was customary to extend the back of a rocker four, six, eight, or ten inches more than the front. With few exceptions, the greater the difference the later the rocker. Some one had discovered that a wonderful swing could be gained by means of increased length, and the bumped ankles and bruised insteps that it would cause were not considered. Bearing in mind that the longer a rocker is, the later its date, we have another means of telling whether or not a chair is converted. If the style of the chair antedates the style of the rocker, then there can be no doubt in our minds.

We show in Plate 1C a converted rocking-chair of true Pennsylvania type. It will be interesting to compare this converted one with Plate 6B, which is a true rocking-chair of the same type. In the example before us we find that the rockers are made of cherry, while the rest of the

CONVERTED TYPES

chair is maple. One oak slat appears to be a replacement. A study of this chair leads me to say that it was doubtless made about 1800 and used as a straight chair for thirty or forty years. Then, when the rush seat gave out, and when the chair may have passed into the possession of a new owner, a board seat was put in, padded with moss, and covered with beaded cross-stitch embroidery. It was then equipped with the cherry rockers, and given a coat of dark-brown paint, banded in gold. This occurred about the year 1845, if I judge the paint correctly. In scraping the chair I found only brown paint on the rockers, while the body had two more coats of paint underneath the brown—the outer a soft gray green, and the inner that old red so familiar to all collectors. When the cross-stitch cover was ripped off we found a name and address written on the under muslin. The locality was that of Nantmeal Village, Pennsylvania.

New England slat-back chairs show different characteristics from the Pennsylvania variety. In the main the slats are straighter, and we sel-

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

dom find the cradle-scrolled rocker previously described. Some New England slat-backs are very simple, such as that on the left in Plate . Its extreme simplicity suggests that its maker, living in some remote country town, did not have a turning-lathe to produce the type of turnings which we see in the chair on the right. The rockers of these two converted chairs appear rather inexpertly made, as if contrived at home by some handy-with-his-tools husband. In each case they are fairly short, and made of different wood from the rest of the chair. If it were not for the obviously different wood and cruder workmanship on the rockers, the left-hand example *might* possibly be considered a true rocking-chair. Its date is not far from 1790, which is not too early for a genuine rocking-chair. On the other hand, the chair with sausage-turned posts and turned front stretchers, decidedly antedates the crude home-made rockers that extend from two to three inches farther in the rear than they do in front.

Next in style to the sausage-turned slat-back



PLATE 7

Two examples, from Maine, of an experimental type of rockers, bar dating from 1780 to 1800. Note the swollen joint where the rocker is attached



CONVERTED TYPES

chair comes the banister-back type. That illustrated on the left in Plate 3 is evidently a converted rocking-chair. Not only are the rockers of different wood, but they are very long in the back, indicating an 1825 date, while the chair itself might be 1730. On the right is a more elaborate form of banister-back chair, with scrolled crest and five turned half-balusters. In general, the crested banister-back chair, combined with a greater number of balusters, is a more highly developed type, and comes therefore at a later date than the banister-back with concave top rail. Something a little indecisive about the turnings on this particular chair leads me to place it fairly far north in New England, and not so early as most five-slat banister-backs are generally placed (1740-50). The rockers are short and shapeless—perhaps home-made.

Representing New England fiddle-back chairs is the converted rocking-chair in Plate 4A. Doubtless there are many similar to this, varying but slightly. It is differentiated from the New York and New Jersey Dutch type by the straight up-

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

right stiles and block-turned front legs. Dating somewhere around 1740, the chair is too old in type to be anything but a conversion. Fiddle-back chairs were popular for many years, continuing to be made as late as 1790 or 1800. We must study the design and construction of chair legs to determine the date. This block turning is of an early period; later came the straight, square, pseudo-Chippendale front leg, and last of all the plain turned leg posts with little or no elaboration.

As I have said, there was no date at which straight chairs ceased to be converted. Of course, as rocking-chairs were produced in larger and larger quantities, the practice of adding rockers became less frequent. Thus it is not often that we find chairs of 1825 date—such as in Plate 5—converted into rocking-chairs. Strangely enough, both of these chairs tend to upset the general theory that short rockers are an indication of early date. Neither chair, judging from its style, could have been constructed before 1825, and possibly both date five or ten years later. In the case

CONVERTED TYPES

of my little Hitchcock chair, illustrated on the left, it is possible that the short, almost curveless rockers were demanded by parents who wished to prevent any violent rocking and consequent disaster to their children. The same theory cannot be applied to the typical New Hampshire chair on the right. Here the short rockers are difficult to explain, unless it be that the owner of this chair was accustomed to using the abbreviated form and did not wish to have her natural rhythm upset by longer rockers. Or it is barely possible that the idea of extending rockers had not reached the remote New Hampshire village where this chair may have been made. Who knows? All I know is that here these two chairs stand, mocking our general theory!

The custom of removing these rockers and putting the converted chair back into its original form has been wide-spread among cabinet-makers. This fact is due, doubtless, to the unenthusiastic attitude of antique-collectors toward rocking-chairs. It seems to me, however, that when converted chairs are "put back" into their former shape,

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

we lose a human record that we should do well to keep. The “personality” of that rocking-chair is destroyed when the rockers are removed. Half its charm is that it was some one’s favorite chair for many years. Since removing the rockers adds nothing to the chair’s comfort, but rather detracts from it, and does not increase its esthetic appeal, I hereby enter a plea for the preserving intact of converted rocking-chairs.



PLATE 8

A typical Shaker slat-back rocking-chair of maple, made between 1825 and 1840. Except for the length of the rockers, all features, including the mushroom-shaped knobs, are the same as on much earlier chairs. Owned by Mrs. Deane Malott

CHAPTER III

TRUE ROCKING-CHAIRS—EARLY EXPERIMENTAL TYPES

BETWEEN the years 1790 and 1800, the first true rocking-chairs appear to have been made. We find many experimental chairs at that date which are a bit clumsy in design and exhibit various methods of attaching rockers. No master craftsman such as Chippendale or Hepplewhite had published any designs for rocking-chairs whereby the American chair-maker could be guided. It remained for him to alter the proportions of such chairs as were then "fashionable," to balance the weighty appearance of rockers at the base. This required that rocking-chairs should have a high back, and, for the sake of a better appearance, they should have arms. The tall, straight rocking-chairs without arms

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

appear to be somewhat out of proportion, and in after years the type was discarded.

One of the earliest examples of true rocking-chairs, which at first glance appears to be a converted one, is shown in Plate 6A. Our attention is attracted by the fact that the rockers are attached to the *inside* of the front legs, and the *outside* of the back legs. Apparently the maker of this chair was concerned over the slant caused by narrowing the seat frame at the back, as was customary in all arm-chairs. What convinces us that this is a true rocking-chair is the fact that the legs were each one of them turned down to a rounded point while they were still in the turning-lathe. The lower side stretcher, correctly spaced above the rocker, would be much too high above the floor, if this had ever been designed for a straight chair. We must remember that the curve of a rocker adds from three to five inches to the height of a chair. For this reason, a rocking-chair leg must be designed that much shorter, in order that the seat frame may be at average height.

An interesting point to be observed in this

EARLY EXPERIMENTAL TYPES

rocking-chair is the way the arm support extends through the seat frame to the upper side stretcher. Greater stability is thereby gained. We find this construction fairly often in New England—particularly in Maine and Connecticut.

Not from New England, but from Pennsylvania, comes the interesting example of a rocking-chair that dates from 1795 to 1800. (Plate 6B). It is similar to the earlier converted types of Pennsylvania slat-back chairs previously mentioned, but the large Queen Anne front stretcher is supplanted by a perfectly straight rung. The “blunt arrow foot” so typical of Pennsylvania chairs is here adapted, in an interesting manner, to accommodate rockers. On this chair we notice that the leg was turned down to the thickness of a peg, and was set into a wider, flatter rocker than the knife-blade type. With this kind of rocker we may feel reasonably certain that the chair is not converted.

Still another method of attaching rockers is shown in Plate 7. The fashion hails from Maine. Here we find an experiment on the part of

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

some chair-maker who had observed how the process of cutting a slot in chair legs weakened the construction. He therefore fashioned rocking-chair legs with a wider piece at the base, for added strength. Into this swollen joint he set the knife-blade rocker without danger of weakening the chair's construction.

It is quite possible that this chair-maker was adopting the method used on what I am told are invalid chairs—the forerunner of wheel-chairs. In the Shaker community at Lebanon, New York, I was shown a chair with enlarged knuckles into which were fitted little wooden wheels like casters. It had been, in days now long past, the chair of one very old Sister whose strength had failed her.

In the early days of the Shakers at Lebanon—from 1790 to 1795—these thrifty souls were actively engaged in chair-making as a profitable industry. Brother William still carries on the Shaker traditions, while Sister Sarah assists with the finishing, dipping the chairs into deep vats of dye and hanging them on wall pegs to dry.



PLATE 9

An old slat-back rocking-chair of unusual design which was made in Hartford, Conn., and traveled to the Pacific Coast and back by ox team, covered wagon, boat, and train. Owned by Mrs. Henry V. Weil

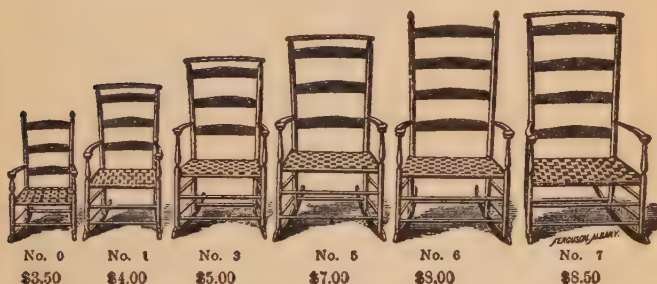
EARLY EXPERIMENTAL TYPES

For more than a century the Shakers have made exactly the same slat-back chair, with no more variation than a slight difference in the finial.

At the time of the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, the Shakers at Lebanon pub-

The Shakers' Slat Back Chairs, with Arms and Rockers.

WORSTED WEB SEATS.



lished a small booklet telling of their chairs, examples of which were exhibited. A page from the booklet, reproduced here, shows the sizes and style of the typical Shaker chair. Most of the illustrations in the pamphlet are of rocking-chairs, though straight chairs were made in large numbers also. On several examples we notice that the finials are surmounted by an extra bar

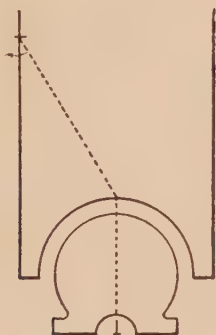
THE ROCKING-CHAIR

of different design from the chair slats. The introduction to the booklet tells us that the bar is meant for the hanging of a back cushion. Not until I read this had I realized why there is such a bar on several different varieties of slat-back chairs. When the slats were curved at the top, it would indeed be difficult to hang a pad or a cushion properly from them.

If the Shakers had established themselves in the chair-making business about fifty years earlier, they would doubtless have invented the rocking-chair. Those who know these people realize their inventive genius as applied to practical every-day things. They were evidently experimenting with a rocking-chair idea when they developed the "tilting" chair, which is so made that it can be tilted backward forty-five degrees without internal strain. A number of old assembly or "meeting" chairs have been found (with seat numbers still on the backs) possessing this curious device in the rear legs. Into a concave hollow is loosely fitted a semi-spherical ball, flat only at the bottom. A leather thong is run through

EARLY EXPERIMENTAL TYPES

the ball, into the chair leg, and is allowed to emerge some two inches above the floor, where it is securely fastened with a wooden peg. It is uncer-



tain how old this device is, but if the Shakers originated it in America, it cannot antedate rockers. It is of course possible that the idea of it was brought over with the first-comers from England, but those who know Shaker history realize that they borrowed far fewer ideas than they originated. The circular saw, the round barn, the washing-machine, and Babbitt metal are only a few of their peculiarly practical inventions.

Because the Shakers adhered so faithfully to their customary forms, it is exceedingly difficult

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

to date their chairs. Some constructed in 1850 appear identical with chairs of 1800, excepting that the intangible atmosphere of age is missing. The makers believe, and rightly, that there never has been, and perhaps never will be, any chair more satisfactory from the point of view of economical construction and perfect comfort than the slat-back. So they continue to perpetuate it, just as they continue to use many of the old-time things that were thoroughly practical. Lest I be accused of exaggerating, let me add that although I had been hunting for several years to find an old-time hot-water kettle still *in situ* in the masonry built to hold it, I succeeded only last summer when I visited the Shaker community at Lebanon. There, in the dairy-house, where the milk cans are washed and sterilized daily, I found the old kettle still in place; and as I lifted the cover to look in I found it full of water that was steaming hot. Then for the first time I noticed that a fire was burning in the tiny oven beneath.

But this is a digression. I must come back to



PLATE 10A

Early Pennsylvania fan-back Windsor rocking chair—1780-90. Note the cradle-shaped rockers and the turning at the feet. Owned by J. Stoddell Stokes

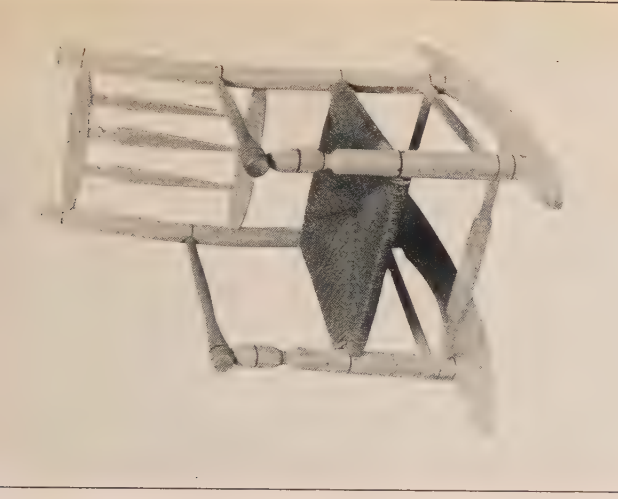


PLATE 10B

A child's rocking-chair of early Sheraton fancy type, with cradle-shaped rockers. Date about 1790. Owned by Esther Stevens Fraser

EARLY EXPERIMENTAL TYPES

Shaker rocking-chairs, a typical example of which is shown in Plate 8. We might surmise that this particular chair dates between 1825 and 1840, because the rockers extend some distance behind the rear leg. In every other point the chair is probably identical with earlier ones made by the Shakers. We must remember that earlier rockers were made very short in all cases. This rocking-chair exhibits all of the Shaker characteristics—extreme simplicity of line, lack of elaborate turnings, the cherry-colored finish that is scarcely more than a light stain, and, what is generally to be found on Shaker arm-chairs, the mushroom-shaped knob where arm and leg-post join.

A slat-back chair of interesting design and still more interesting history is shown in Plate 9. It is owned by Mrs. Henry V. Weil of New York, whose daughter, Mrs. Rhea Mansfield Knittle, writes this history of it:

The chair is a five-slat back with a rather unusual top in perfect condition. It was made near Hartford, Connecticut. Two of my great-great-great-grandfathers were

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

in Moses Cleveland's surveying party that opened up the Western Reserve in the Ohio Territory for the Government. In 1813 they (i.e. the surveying party.) returned to Hartford, Winsted, Colebrook, and Lyme for their families and furnishings. My great-great-grandmother rode overland in the covered wagon, sitting in this chair and holding my great-great-grandmother, then a baby. Incidentally she became the first school-teacher in northern Ohio. The chair stayed in Ashtabula County until 1870, then it went to Ashland County. In the 1890's it went to the Pacific coast, then to Kansas City, and later was brought back to New York. It has been transported by ox-team, covered wagon, boat, automobile, railroad train—steam and electric. In fact, it has experienced almost every mode of travel, by chance, except airplane. In a year or two Mother and I expect to present it to the Ohio State Archeological and Historical Society.

This rocking-chair we examined carefully, and evidence was found that the rockers and the top slat were original and coincident with the rest of the chair. Its design is curious—not common but one which I have noticed elsewhere in Connecticut. We are not to suppose that this chair was new in 1813, but rather that it had been used for a long while by Mrs. Weil's great-great-grandmother, who had grown accustomed to it.

EARLY EXPERIMENTAL TYPES

While slat-back and fiddle-back rockers may have been popular, they by no means overshadowed the Windsor rocking-chairs, which were destined to be the forerunners of that great American institution the Boston rocker. Early Windsor rocking-chairs were sometimes low-backed, but frequently had the added comb so much desired by collectors. The rocker shown in the frontispiece of this volume caused an unexpected commotion during its transportation in a limousine from Litchfield, Connecticut, to Cambridge, Massachusetts. While the owner of the chair stopped for luncheon at a large hotel in Worcester, no less than three attempts were made by passers-by to purchase the treasure. One man was so insistent that he jumped on the running-board while the car was in motion, and the chauffeur was forced to draw up to the curb to get rid of him. One man offered fifty dollars for it and demanded that it be sold to him. And last of all—adding insult to injury—a street-cleaner offered the chauffeur five dollars for the chair! This substantiates a rumor we have heard that

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

street-sweepers, ash-men, and junkmen are sometimes employed as scouts or informers by antique-dealers.

We will admit that this comb-back Windsor rocking-chair was worth all that commotion. There is a subtle artistry about it which gives it an air of distinction and rarity. While later variations of the comb-back type are found with decorations, this chair was carefully scraped and no evidence was disclosed of any design or even a simple stripe on the nicely shaped comb.

A Windsor rocking-chair of smaller type is shown in Plate 10A. This example exhibits distinctly its Pennsylvania German origin. Its broad, somewhat clumsy rockers, the great spread of its legs, and the general stolidity of its proportions proclaim its habitat.

A highly individual Sheraton fancy model of a true rocking-chair is shown in Plate 10B. At first I judged this to be a converted chair, but scraping proved me wrong. There were six coats of paint on the chair, and every one was found, in the same succession, upon the heavy rockers.



PLATE IIA

A remarkable painted Windsor rocking-chair of about 1800, with bamboo turning and high framed back

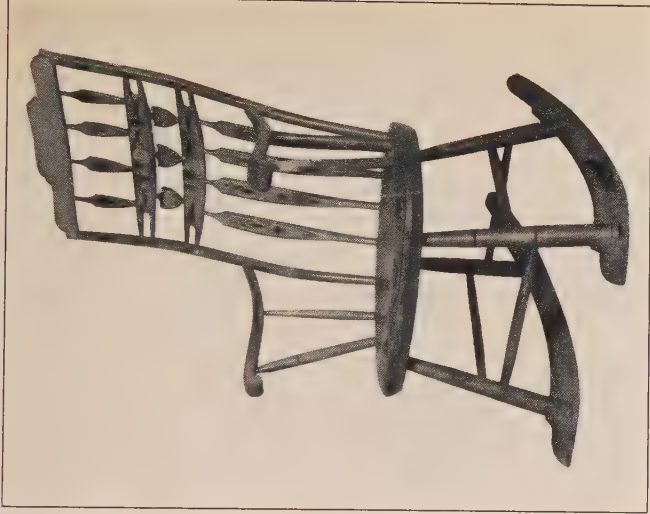


PLATE IIB

Unusual painted rocking-chair with features of Sheraton fancy-chair derivation. Date 1820-25. Owned by Edith Rand

EARLY EXPERIMENTAL TYPES

I had confidently expected to locate a classic type decoration, but failed to find the slightest evidence of it. All ornamentation appears to have been confined to the black circular stripes around each post. Whether the chair was never finished or the striping was all the decoration intended for it, I cannot say.

It has been suggested that early Windsor chair-makers were accustomed to striping and not to the painting of designs. When Sheraton fancy ideas began to invade the Windsor-chair shops, certain makers may have been able, with their joiners' skill, to *construct* Sheraton fancy chairs but not to decorate them. It therefore was sometimes the custom for the chair-maker to employ a decorator and finisher for the painted chairs. I know that one such partnership existed in Salem. In the case of this little rocking-chair, we are led to believe that a decorator was not secured, so that the simple but expertly executed stripe was all that could be applied. Or else the purchaser did not desire an elaborate decoration for a child's chair that would soon be damaged, and requested

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

the economy of a simple finish. Whatever the reason, we know the chair is not inexpertly constructed, but closely resembles the fine Philadelphia fancy chair of 1795 date. The rockers, too, seem to be Pennsylvanian.

It is to be observed that rocking-chairs were almost invariably of the simpler types. To my knowledge, no fine Chippendale, Hepplewhite, or Sheraton chairs were converted into rockers. We must assume, then, that rocking-chairs were "of the people," not of the aristocracy, and were designed to create comfort for those who could not pay dearly for it. The wealthy class might have stuffed easy-chairs in their drawing-rooms, but, copying English aristocratic ways, they might not have their chairs on rockers! Secretly, they may have had their rocking-chairs in bedrooms or libraries, like Franklin, where they might retire for a little comfort without being observed by visitors. We may suppose that Mrs. Mary Norris's rocking-chair—reseated by Savery—was in some secluded room, since it would hardly be in keeping with the elegance of her "parlor." But the great

EARLY EXPERIMENTAL TYPES

middle class undoubtedly had their rocking-chairs in the living-room, by the fireside perhaps, where the old folks might sit and warm themselves and rest with great comfort. I believe that early true rocking-chairs are coming into popularity among collectors of antiques—as hooked rugs, which are also “of the people,” have become highly desirable and widely sought after.

CHAPTER IV

PAINTED WINDSOR ROCKING-CHAIRS

EARLY Windsor types of true rocking-chairs were largely of the comb-back variety so rarely to be found nowadays. After the year 1800 we find these Windsors turning into a painted and decorated type, due to the craze for painted chairs, created by Hepplewhite and Sheraton. Our American chair-makers were quick to discover the economical advantage in painted chairs—that cheaper woods than mahogany could be used. Windsor chairs may have started in the early part of the eighteenth century with a natural-wood finish, but by the last of the century we find them advertised almost exclusively as green Windsor chairs, and by 1800 many were also advertised as red Windsor chairs, black Windsors, and yellow Windsors. It becomes



PLATE 12A

A low-back "stepped" Windsor rocking-chair of about 1800-1810

PLATE 12B

A comb-back Windsor rocking-chair of about 1810-1820

PAINTED WINDSOR ROCKING-CHAIRS

apparent, therefore, that color was in demand.

With the advent of painted chairs, there came inevitably a craze for decoration. No painter who has any of the creative gift can resist the temptation to see what effect a little contrasting color will have. So we find makers of early Windsor rocking-chairs experimenting with a winding spray of leaves—inspired, no doubt, by the Sheraton and Hepplewhite fashion of winding a painted garland of leaves and flowers about the legs of chairs and tables.

The high-backed Windsor rocking-chair in Plate 11A is one of these early examples. Its design is a most interesting adaptation of a square-topped "Sheraton Windsor," made to suit the needs of a rocking-chair. The back has been considerably extended, thus dispensing with the need of a comb top as head-rest. Across the seat front, and around the upright back posts, runs a curving spray of leaves. The rocker decoration is curiously clumsy, leading me to believe that the decorator had never before ornamented a rocker; the design seems highly experimental, and

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

is far from being as expert as the rest of the decoration.

I have seen one or two similar rocking-chairs in yellow with burnt-sienna stripes around the "bamboo joints" and the same winding spray of leaves done in burnt sienna. "Bamboo" chairs were popular from 1795 to 1810, according to the old newspaper advertisements I have collected.

With the adoption of painted decoration in the American Sheraton period the makers of Windsor chairs began to feel the need of expanding some surface so as to allow for more painted design. Thus we find that the "stepped" type of fan-back Windsor was widely produced because it offered a broader surface for ornamentation than the "bamboo" type. The term "stepped" is derived from the manner in which the wide top slat is shaped at the ends in a series of cuts that resemble—by a decided stretch of the imagination—a series of two or three steps. Some of these stepped Windsors were designed with an additional comb, and others have always had low backs without a comb extension. In some the

PAINTED WINDSOR ROCKING-CHAIRS

presence of holes gives evidence of a comb, once existing, having been broken off accidentally.

Two such Windsor rocking-chairs are shown side by side in Plates 12A and 12B. The low-back chair was originally white with a spray of leaves done in "verdigris green." While the coloring is now black and yellow, the decorative design was preserved as accurately as was possible after the removal of three outer coats of paint. That I failed to get it perfectly is due to the worn condition of the under coat of paint, which doubtless was the occasion for the second coat. From the decoration and coloring I should date this chair about the year 1810.

About ten years earlier (judging by the rockers) I should date the comb-back stepped Windsor shown beside the low-back rocking-chair. Here, strangely enough, we see in its original form the design I *almost* saw under the paint on the former chair. And in this case the coloring is the identical black and yellow which I put on the low-back chair. When the chair was found, the comb had been broken off, but the thickness of

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

the stepped slat, combined with the presence of holes in the proper place, showed that a comb had originally been there.

In Plate 13A we have another example of the comb-back Windsor rocking-chair. In its present state, it bears no design to tell us the story of its original appearance, but without a doubt the chair appeared originally somewhat like the last two chairs discussed. Why do I say "without a doubt"? Because I have never yet seen a stepped Windsor chair, in unscraped condition, that did not give evidence of having been, originally, painted and decorated. Those chairs which have been scraped down to the wood, as this one has been, are tantalizing in that it is now impossible to tell just how they appeared when they left the chair-maker's hands.

If I might digress further, how much I could say on the subject of scraping painted furniture! The recent craze for natural finish in antiques—particularly the popularity of maple—has caused irreparable damage to many of our painted types of furniture. Painted Sheratons and Windsors

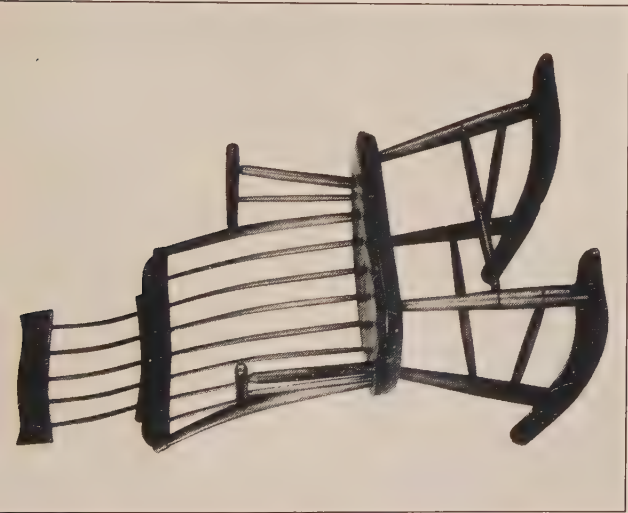


PLATE 13A

Fine example of a comb-back "stepped" Windsor rocking-chair dating about 1800. Owned by J. Stogdell Stokes

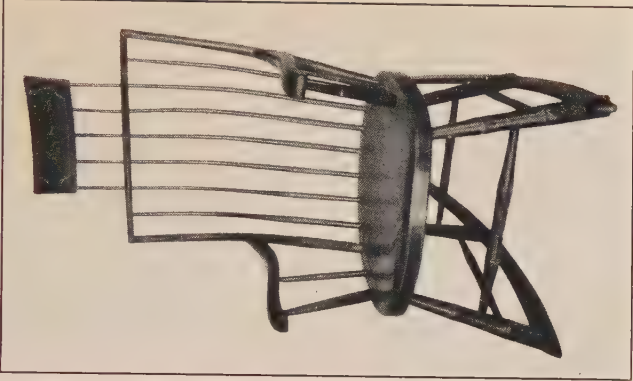


PLATE 13B

Comb-back Windsor rocking-chair of about 1820, showing the tendency toward a broader top slat. Owned by E. S. Youse

PAINTED WINDSOR ROCKING-CHAIRS

made largely of maple have suffered the complete loss of their decorations because amateur and even expert collectors were assembling a "maple room." In some cases the broadened slats were specially designed to carry a certain decoration, without which they look bare. The time has come for lovers of antiques to demand that decorated chairs shall be allowed to remain decorated, and in the same style as when first completed. Let us not ask to have them decorated more elegantly or more simply, but demand that they be done *correctly*. Let us not have an 1840 decoration put on a chair made in 1800, or a classic Philadelphia design put upon a clumsy chair from Maine. In other words, we must insist that in each case the original decoration be found, and reproduced exactly. Thus shall we preserve a scientific record of our antiques.

Stepped Windsors were popular from 1790 to 1820, when a new form of painted decoration came into being. In all cases I find these chairs simply decorated, in more or less classic style—with an urn, a spray of leaves, a wreath, a simple

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

tulip or two, a bunch of grapes, or the acorn-and-oak-leaf design. This decoration is always in flat color, executed with a free-hand brush or in gold-leaf. Never do I find it in stenciled bronze, though I dare say one or two exceptions to this generalization may come to light.

Plate 13B shows a Windsor comb-back rocker of *early* Empire date, when the delicacy of Sheraton design was not forgotten. Here the comb is simply striped in yellow, and is without a bronze stencil decoration of flowers and leaves such as we might expect to find on a chair of the 1820 type. In this example we see distinctly a resemblance to the tortoise-shell comb so fashionable at this date. From that resemblance the term comb-back Windsor has originated.

Free-hand decoration cannot be executed both well and quickly. The two ideas do not agree at all, no matter how expert the decorator may be. So it was that stencil processes of adornment were speedily adopted after their introduction about the year 1817. At this date we were just entering the Empire period, the furniture of

PAINTED WINDSOR ROCKING-CHAIRS

which was characterized largely by an added heaviness in weight and more ostentation of carved or painted decoration.

Later, the Empire influence introduced a broad top slat, profusely stenciled. A fine example was sold recently at an auction in Reading, Pennsylvania. I should hesitate to say it was a local product, because I have never seen anything like it in that locality. It was a writing-arm rocking-chair, than which we cannot imagine anything better built for comfort. Its broad top slat carried an elaborate bronze design of fruit, leaves, and flowers. (Plate 14B.)

Fine stenciling also adorns the variation of a comb-back rocker that is shown in Plate 14A. While this type of chair is the outgrowth of a Windsor, it has gone through so many transitions that it shows but little resemblance to *early* Windsor forms. The arrow-shaped uprights are not reminiscent of the customary Windsor spindles, but bear closer relationship to certain Sheraton fancy-chair designs. Early nineteenth-century Windsors adopted these arrow-shaped spindles,

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

and so it is that this rocker may still be called a comb-back Windsor. With the exception of the comb, which doubtless was once decorated like the lower cross slat, the painting on this chair is in excellent condition.

The story of Windsor rocking-chairs now nears its close. It was not long before the combination of widened top slats and the Empire fondness for curves produced that highly popular type known as the Boston rocker. This chair came to be used so generally that few other styles were made except in remote parts of Pennsylvania, upper New York State, and northern New England. There were many variations in Boston rockers—so many, in fact, that it is deemed suitable to go into the subject at length.

I should here give way to Mr. Dyer's exposition of the subject, but before I close my history it might be well to give a short résumé of those other types which were contemporaneous with or later than the Boston rocker.

PLATE 14A

Late comb-back with fine stenciling and arrow-shaped spindles of fancy-chair type. Owned by Arthur K. Hunt



PLATE 14B

Late Windsor rocking-chair (1825-30) with writing-arm and broad, stenciled top slat. Owned by E. S. Youse



CHAPTER V

LATER TYPES

GEOGRAPHICALLY, Boston rockers were almost universally popular. According to the old advertisements, many were supplied for the Southern and Western trade. Hitchcock, making knock-down chairs for export trade to the West Indies and elsewhere, may even have made Boston rockers in parts ready to be assembled upon arrival at foreign ports.

But the Boston rocker could not supply every section of the country. Certain remote places manufactured individual types of rocking-chairs that cannot be mistaken. There is, for instance, the Pennsylvania "Dutch" adaptation of the Windsor style of rocking-chair, represented by my great-grandmother's chair, shown in Plate 15A. Its broad, concededly imperfect propor-

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

tions bespeak its origin. The date is somewhere around the year 1830, judging from its style and its decoration. This date is supported by the fact that my great-grandparents were married in the year 1830, and it is to be supposed that they had this chair among their first possessions when they entered the "connubial circle."

I am quoting here a phrase borrowed from one of the old newspaper advertisements that interest me because they reflect the thoughts, manners, and speech of people now forgotten. The last sentence in each of these two advertisements is quite different from those we see in our current periodicals. We read:

Public Vendue. On Monday next, a Variety of Household Furniture belonging to the deceased, viz:— Feather Beds and Bedding, Mahogany Tables and Desks, and a Variety of Kitchen Furniture, etc. worthy the attention of all persons about entering the Connubial Circle.

—"Salem Gazette," March 17, 1795.

William Vans once more desires to inform the respectable Inhabitants of the County of Essex and others, that Captain Lyde has brought him from London, a

LATER TYPES

pretty small assortment of low priced Looking Glasses, from 11 Dollars to 2 Dollars a Piece. Young Ladies who have thoughts of entering into the most happy State of Matrimony the ensuing Fall would do well to come and buy in Season.

—“Essex Gazette,” July 7-14, 1772.

Doubtless a rocking-chair was one of the first purchases of the bridegroom for his new home—if, indeed, one had not already been given to him and his bride. An acquaintance of mine tells me that it was always her father's custom to give rocking-chairs as wedding presents to the young couples he wished to felicitate. Doubtless he believed thoroughly in what I have hinted at before—that no home is completely happy unless it has a rocking-chair.

Returning to our geographical types, we find that the rocking-chair from New Hampshire and Vermont generally includes broadened spindles that differ from the customary Windsor type. Whereas the Boston rocker preserves the shaved hickory Windsor spindle, the up-state New Hampshire rocker has many variations of shaped

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

uprights. A comb-back from New Hampshire is shown in Plate 15B. The chair is soft vermilion and its free-hand decoration is white, yellow, and green. For some reason we do not find much bronze stenciling on New Hampshire pieces. Where a little bronze-work occurs, there is usually much more brush decoration combined with it.

From New Hampshire also comes my rocking cradle settee, shown in Plate 16. This style of settee is sometimes called "rockee," though I am unable to find any authentic information concerning the origin of the term. The earliest type of rocking settee that has come to my attention dates between 1820 and 1825. When and where the idea of such a piece of furniture was conceived, it is impossible to say. But to American inventive genius this variation of the rocking-chair may be ascribed. Here the mother may sit at one end, contentedly rocking herself and baby at the same time, while her hands continue the busy work of knitting socks or sewing baby-clothes. As a labor-saving device, in the days when babies *had* to



PLATE 15A

A Pennsylvania rocking-chair of 1830 (Boston rocker period), painted a pale gray, with green and black stripes and gold leaf design. Owned by Esther Stevens Fraser

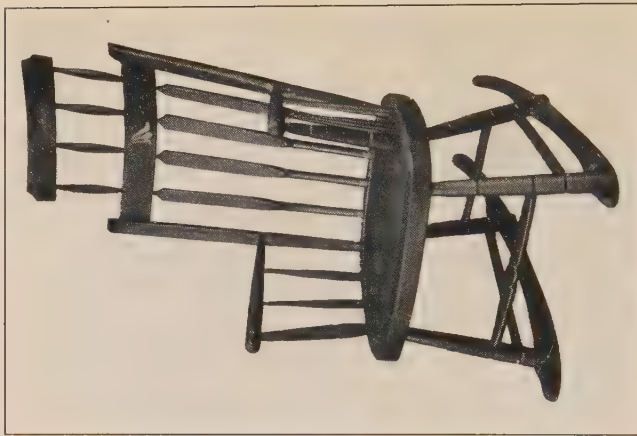


PLATE 15B

A late New Hampshire type of painted comb-back rocking-chair, with features surviving from earlier forms. Date 1825-30. Owned by Mrs. B. L. Love

LATER TYPES

be rocked, nothing could have been more useful.

Several of these rocking cradle benches have been found equipped for twins, leaving a space between where the mother might sit. Since babies do not stay at the cradle age forever, the settees were generally made so that the crib part might be removed, thereby affording room for at least three people. In the case of my example, the cradle part is hinged so that it will drop down easily against the wooden bumper knobs on the under bracing. The top slat and seat front of this cradle rocker are stenciled in bronze, while the rest of the decoration is in two shades of green. The striping is done in green and yellow—somewhat elaborately.

From northwestern Massachusetts and from New York State, in the vicinity of Albany and northward, comes a type of chair represented in Plate 17A. The chief difference between this chair and the Boston rocker is the presence of a secondary cross slat and flattened spindles. This is another rocking-chair with a covered-wagon history. The present owner writes: "It was

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

brought from Colrain to Gill, Massachusetts; and from Gill to Michigan in 1832, my grandmother sitting in it in the wagon, and caring for her baby. It was at one time padded with old quilts and covered with a pretty old tapestry or damask, and had floral decorations."

A similar chair—slightly earlier in date, perhaps—is shown in Plate 17B. It was found in upper New York State, whither it may have come when northwestern Massachusetts people were expanding to the north and further westward. I give it here because it shows its type of stenciling distinctly.

We now come to that part of rocking-chair history which does not thrill us. It is the 1850 date, at which beauty in furniture was almost forgotten in the mad rush for speedy factory production. We approach now the subject of Lincoln rockers, Sleepy Hollow rockers, and American Standard rockers—names so intriguing that we wish the chairs were worthy of them.

One of the greatest tragedies in American history has caused the name Lincoln to be given to

LATER TYPES

all rockers of a certain type. It is officially recorded that among the original furnishings of Ford's theater in Washington there was a set of chairs and a rocker upholstered in crimson damask. In the course of several years' hard usage, this rocker became rather shabby, and was retired from the stage to the manager's office. On that ill-starred night when the fall of Richmond was being celebrated at the performance of "Our American Cousin," this rocking-chair was placed in President Lincoln's box for his own personal comfort, and he was sitting in the chair when the fatal shot was fired. Plate 18 shows the original Lincoln rocker.

Several years ago, when a photograph of this rocker was published in the magazine "Antiques," the term **Lincoln Rocker** was immediately applied to other rocking-chairs of the kind. Representing, as it does so distinctly, the type of chair that was popular in the days of Lincoln's legal and political prominence, the rocker has been most fortunately named. (Plate 19A.) It is highly probable that Lincoln used just such a chair as this at home.

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

Some of these rockers, made in mahogany, had several points of late Empire style, scrolled arms, and curving backs. In date they might belong anywhere from 1835 to 1855. There were also the rosewood and black-walnut kinds, with or without carved grapes and roses, bespeaking that style inspired by Louis Philippe and reminiscent of Louis XV. Mr. Dyer says that his mother had such a chair, with low arms, that she called her sewing-chair. Sometimes we find these rocking-chairs cane-seated and cane-backed instead of being padded and cloth-covered.

The Sleepy Hollow rocking-chair goes one step further. It exaggerates every curve, until excessive comfort is attained at the expense of beauty. In date these chairs fall well into the Victorian period—from 1850 to 1870—and seem to be found now chiefly in the middle West. All that may once have been in the East seem to have journeyed to Indiana, Illinois, and thereabouts with the great tide of settlers which surged westward during that period.

One pitiful attempt was made to improve upon



PLATE 16

A splendid example of the cradle rocker, or rocking settee, of about 1830 (Boston rocker period). The decoration is an interesting combination of free-hand painting and stenciling. Owned by Esther Stevens Fraser

LATER TYPES

Franklin's rocking-chair, somewhere around the year 1870. No doubt it was heralded as "the great American Invention, the Stationary or Standard Rocker." It consisted of a stationary base, upon which were mounted the rockers, secured at the center with strong steel springs. The chair was usually upholstered in plush, with many rows of tassels and fringe. (Plate 19B.)

Never having tried a spring rocker, I cannot give evidence concerning its comfort or lack of comfort, but I am told that this type was by no means so comfortable as the good old-time rocking-chair. Mr. Dyer relates that about 1890 his father bought a spring rocker. It had a frame of turned wood with many little knobs that kept coming off and getting lost. The seat and back were made of red Brussels carpeting stretched on the frame, and it was adorned with fringe in front. It seemed to be popular in the family and was used continually until it wore out. But to Mr. Dyer it now seems rather dreadful. The springs squeaked horribly, and somehow or other occasionally pinched his fingers.

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

It is not to be wondered at, then, that this American standard rocker did not enjoy the unquestioned popularity of the Boston rocker. It was not long before the good old types of rocking-chairs were being reproduced once more, to the immense gratification of us all. Now it is difficult for me to find even one standard rocker in order that this ludicrous example might be illustrated. With the days of antique reproductions, we come up to the present time, when our early styles are exceedingly popular once more.

Let us be thankful that there are still many antique rocking-chairs in existence. To those old-time craftsmen who wrought both enduringly and well, we should feel grateful for this heritage that they have left us. Who they were, we have, for the most part, no means of knowing, but how innately artistic they were we cannot but realize. They have long since passed on, but their ideals, their patience, and their craftsmanship are still represented by the furniture that has outlived them.

Part II

THE BOSTON ROCKER

BY WALTER A. DYER

CHAPTER VI

AN ELUSIVE TRAIL

IT is a curious thing about the Boston rocker that almost everybody knows what it is and almost nobody knows anything about it—where or when it originated or the steps that marked its development. Probably I should never have found out much about its history if I had not become particularly interested in the chair itself, if I had not been the possessor of an old New England farm-house which seemed to demand Boston rockers as part of its normal and appropriate furnishings, if I did not chance to live in a section where Boston rockers of the simpler type abound. Having once set out on a quest for Boston rockers, I found myself eager to learn something of their elusive story.

My fondness for the Boston rocker is based, I

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

think, upon childhood memories. When I was a small boy my old grandmother spent most of her time in a sunny upper window of our home, sitting in an old rocking-chair, knitting and reading. I suppose I shall always associate that type of old chair with my deaf, even-tempered, beloved grandmother. It had flat rockers, turned and slightly raked legs, turned stretchers, a wood seat fashioned in a peculiar roll, arms curving over at the ends to fit the hands, and a high back of two turned stiles and seven slender spindles surmounted by a horizontal piece with curved outline at the level of the sitter's head. Both spindles and head-piece had been steamed and bent to fit the body and the back was pitched at an accommodating angle. My grandmother's chair had a flat cushion on the seat and a tidy of some sort of needlework on the back. It was a comfortable and not ungraceful chair.

Occasionally, during the intervening years, I noticed such rockers but thought of them only as old-fashioned chairs. I used to have a somewhat conventional conception of the antique. I

AN ELUSIVE TRAIL

saw no Boston rockers in antique shops or among the possessions of collectors, and assumed that they were neither old enough nor rare enough to be held in high esteem.

Gradually, however, my point of view changed. I came to make my home in an old Massachusetts farm-house which seemed to call less for the fine mahogany furniture of the antique collectors than for the simpler, humbler furnishings such as it had known in its youth, like cherry drop-leaf tables and Windsor chairs. My attention was drawn continually to the old-fashioned rocking-chairs that were so numerous in my neighborhood. I began to appreciate their quaint beauty and unusual comfort, and to consider them sufficiently antique for the purposes of my home. I began to desire a Boston rocker.

It became evident to me that this sort of chair must have been very common during a previous generation, at least in my section of the Connecticut Valley. One could not take a ten-mile ride in summer thereabouts, without seeing two or three of them on porches. It struck me that there

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

must be literally hundreds of them in homes in the vicinity.

Not being a practised antique-hunter, however, I found it not so easy to acquire one. The owners appeared to value these chairs both for their usefulness and for their associations. Many families treasured "grandmother's chair," and I came to the conclusion that whatever opinion the antique-collectors might hold of the Boston rocker, there were those who loved it. All of which did nothing to allay my acquisitive desires.

I was, however, persistent. I wanted a Boston rocker or two. I wanted one to sit in of an evening, for to me they were the last word in comfort, being at once well shaped to the body and hung at just the right angle, and at the same time not so luxurious as to induce slumping and drowsing. Besides, I felt that they would harmonize with the old farm-house scheme of furnishing. And, being an American male, I like a rocking-chair.

At last I found courage to stop and dicker with the owner of a Boston rocker which I saw on a



PLATE 17A

Rocking-chair of about 1830,
of a type not uncommon in
New York State and western
New England. Owned by
Mrs. Elmer E. White



PLATE 17B

A more elaborate
and graceful example
of the same type, with
pencil decoration.
Courtesy of J. J. Shay

AN ELUSIVE TRAIL

porch that I passed every time I went in to town. I found it in need of paint and some repairs, but I was ready to undertake the task of rehabilitation. The bargain was struck and I paid four dollars for that chair.

That was the beginning of what has become a modest collection of Boston rockers. One of my stencil-decorated chairs came from eastern Massachusetts and the other three from Newburgh, New York. One which has apple-wood arms, natural finish, I bought for seven dollars in an antique shop ten miles away. The rest were all obtained within the lines of my own town. Most of them were secured several years ago before there was any noticeable demand for Boston rockers, and I got them for about half what I should have to pay to-day. My "little Boston" cost me two dollars and my maple Boston five dollars.

It has occurred to me that readers may sometimes be curious to know how books come to be written. I am telling how this one came to be written and the slow steps that led up to it.

Having begun to collect Boston rockers, I be-

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

gan to wonder about their origin. Why were there so many in this immediate vicinity? Were they manufactured hereabouts? What was the history of their development? How old were they? How did they get their name? How came it that Boston rockers from various sections of New England bore so close a family resemblance? Why did I never run across early or transitional types? Did the Boston rocker spring into being all of a sudden, in its final form?

My first move was to consult books and magazine articles, but I found scarcely a paragraph about rocking-chairs, and scarcely a line about Boston rockers. All of the authorities on American furniture seemed to have studiously avoided the subject. That struck me as odd, since the rocking-chair was distinctly an American invention, dating back at least to 1800, and hence, one would think, of considerable importance. I am still unable to explain this omission. In Luke Vincent Lockwood's "Colonial Furniture in America," however, and in Frances Clary Morse's "Furniture of the Olden Time" I found refer-

AN ELUSIVE TRAIL

ences to and illustrations of Windsor rockers which did give me a clue as to origin and an idea to start with.

By dint of casual questioning of well-informed persons, and by a process of inference, I reached certain broad conclusions. Boston rockers, I learned, were made in considerable numbers in various parts of New England during the forties and fifties of the last century. I became convinced that they were an outgrowth of late forms of the Windsor rocker. I could learn of no leader in their manufacture, but there had been, apparently, little or no hesitation to copy, for though the chairs with which I was familiar varied somewhat in minor details, they were strikingly similar in the essential features. They had been made in Connecticut and in both western and eastern Massachusetts. Beyond this I was still in ignorance—as was every one else.

One day in the summer of 1923 I made a pilgrimage to Montague, Massachusetts, and to Dike Mill, the unique summer home of Mr. Carl Purington Rollins of the Yale University Press. It

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

is altogether charming, this restoration. The exterior of the old mill has been but little altered and it stands beside the mill-pond surrounded by old-fashioned flowers. Its antiquity is apparent at a glance; the boards have weathered to a wonderful burnt-sienna color. Inside it has been made habitable, but upstairs the ancient rafters and much of the look of an old mill remain.

The oldest part of the building is of brick and was originally erected, about 1800, for an iron forge. Later a sawmill was moved on to the land adjoining the forge. About 1840 the two buildings were connected and enlarged by Richardson & Dike, who operated it as a grist-mill first and later as a furniture factory. During the fifties chairs were turned out here in considerable quantities—plain kitchen chairs, Boston rockers, finer stenciled chairs of the Hitchcock type, and probably other sorts.

When Mr. Rollins bought the mill, about fifteen years ago, and began the congenial task of restoring it, he came upon a lot of paper stencils that had been used in the chair-making—some



PLATE 18

Abraham Lincoln's favorite rocking-chair. Date about 1855. Courtesy of the U. S. National Museum

AN ELUSIVE TRAIL

two hundred of them, I believe. Many of them he discovered to be beautiful specimens of handicraft. He arranged and numbered them and has had them on exhibition at the Pennsylvania Museum and elsewhere. They form one of the best collections of old furniture stencils in the country, though Mrs. Fraser, the well-known authority on stencils, informs me that they are less interesting artistically than earlier examples. They were apparently cut out free-hand, laboriously, with a sharp knife.

I began to speculate as to the present state of these old Montague chairs. Where are they all now? Apparently there are not a great many of them in Montague. The Unitarian Church there owns the best ones, some of them bearing the original stenciled patterns in excellent condition. But for the most part, I suppose, the stencil-work long ago wore off and the chairs were painted over. They were sold up and down the Connecticut Valley by itinerant peddlers, and no doubt are still to be found here and there in kitchens and on porches.

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

But I am wandering a bit from the subject of Boston rockers. I saw at the Dike Mill stencils that were unquestionably intended for the backs of Bostons. This fixed the origin of some of them at least. It seemed more than likely that many of our local Boston rockers had come from Montague. But certainly there must have been other factories turning them out.

About this time my attention was called to an article on Hitchcock chairs, in the magazine "Antiques," with a photograph of a fine Boston rocker, beautifully stenciled, and very similar in form to those made at Montague. Lambert Hitchcock was in business alone in Hitchcocksville (now River-ton), Connecticut, from 1826 to 1829,¹ and as a member of the firm of Hitchcock, Alford & Co., till 1843. The rocking-chair in question bore the mark of Hitchcock, Alford & Co., establishing beyond a doubt another source of Boston rockers, as well as the approximate age of this one.

¹ These are the dates usually given. In the American Advertising Directory of 1831, however, Lambert Hitchcock's name appears alone and there is some reason for believing that Alford did not join him until 1833 or 1835.

AN ELUSIVE TRAIL

And there, for the time being, the trail seemed to end. My quest for further information proved fruitless, but I was not satisfied. Many questions remained unanswered, particularly regarding earlier forms and the history of development.

In January, 1924, I published in the magazine "Country Life" a brief article setting forth such incomplete data as I had been able to gather up to that time and inviting correspondence from persons owning Boston rockers and professing to know about them. One by one, letters came in from all parts of the country, many of them inclosing photographs. Much of the accompanying information was in the nature of personal history, interesting in itself but not suited to my purpose. Here and there, however, I was able to extract some item of genuine value, and two or three of the letters were from persons who had given the subject considerable study. The photographs, too, showed me that there was greater variety in Boston rockers than I had supposed.

Laboriously I gathered a bit of information here and a plausible theory there, piecing them

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

together into a whole which began to look more and more like a continuous story.

Finally, through the agency of Mr. Homer Eaton Keyes, editor of "Antiques," I got in touch with Mrs. Esther Stevens Fraser, who, largely through her interest in stencils, had been gathering much valuable material concerning the historic development of American chairs. The story of the rocking-chair, I found, had interested her particularly, and she had some information concerning early Bostons—particularly dates derived from her study of stencils—which helped to fill in the gaps in my history.

Mrs. Fraser was encouraged to complete her study of the origin of the American rocking-chair, and I was enabled to complete my story of the Boston rocker. By supplementing each other's data and photographs we were able to compose a fairly complete and unbroken story. In such manner this book came to be written.



PLATE 19A

An example of the so-called Lincoln rocker, a type familiar to the Civil War generation. Owned by Mrs. C. M. Hutchinson.

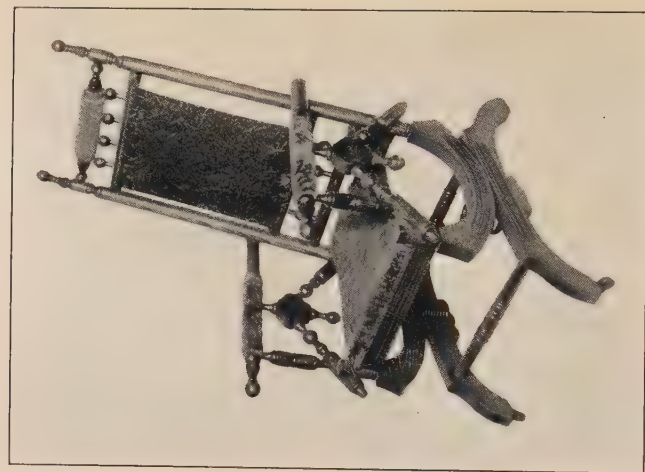


PLATE 19B

The standard, stationary, patent, or spring rocker, which squeaked into popularity during the 1850s. Photographed by the author.

CHAPTER VII

THE EMERGENCE OF THE BOSTON

IN the earlier forms of the Boston rocker many variations are to be found, some of them making for greater grace and beauty, but the most familiar form is that which I have already described in speaking of my grandmother's chair. This is the Boston rocker that everybody knows, the typical mid-century form which became standardized between 1840 and 1850 (Plates 24B to 26). How did it come into being?

I am unable to throw much light on the origin of the name, since Boston was not the only place where these chairs were made, nor, I think, the first place. The name is, however, sufficiently authentic. I am in possession of a clipping from the Bridgeport "Standard" of July 26, 1845, containing two advertisements in which the

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

Boston rocker is specifically mentioned (though the price is not quoted), so the name appears to have become established by that date at least. I am inclined to think that other names, such as "Jerusalem rocker" and "Hancock rocker," are later inventions lacking authority. I am quite sure they were not used to indicate separate types.

These rocking-chairs were turned out in tremendous quantities and were widely and justly popular in their day. They were cheap and comfortable—perhaps the most comfortable chairs that had been made up to that time with the exception of the wing arm-chair. But did the form come into being full-fledged, with all the details of its design complete and accepted? That, to one who has made any study at all of furniture styles, is unthinkable. There must have been some gradual evolution from earlier types; it must be possible to discover some evidence of transition.

While much of the furniture of the nineteenth century in this country was based upon European models and followed the changing fashions in England and France, there were developed at the

THE EMERGENCE OF THE BOSTON

same time provincial types chiefly in the field of what we call cottage furniture, which were distinctly American. The American Windsor chair, though based originally on the English Windsor, followed a style-development of its own and became a purely American chair. The so-called fancy chair, though derived from Sheraton, became an American type, and the Hitchcock chair and its kindred grew out of that. The rocking-chair was an American invention, and the Boston rocker was an American provincial type based upon no European model. We must look to the furniture of our own land in order to discover its beginnings.

The American Windsor chair in its later forms lost its loop and acquired a square top to the back. It is this square top that is to be found most commonly on the Windsor rockers of the second decade of the nineteenth century. All the well-posted individuals whom I have consulted agree with me that the Boston rocker was a direct descendant of this Windsor rocker. A casual glance at the Boston rocker, with its wooden seat and

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

slender spindles, is enough to suggest this. The steps in the development, however, are not so easy to trace.

In her "Furniture of the Olden Time," published twenty-five years ago, Frances Clary Morse showed, on page 178, photographs of two rocking-chairs. The first is a late Windsor type, dated 1820, with rounded flat seat, broad head-piece, raked and bamboo-turned legs, and arms of the Boston type. It is very similar to the chair shown in Plate 20. The second she dated 1830 and called a Windsor rocking-chair, but it is a typical Boston rocker of the 1845 period or later. It is of curly maple with cane seat. The juxtaposition of these two illustrations I found significant and suggestive.

To go back somewhat into Mrs. Fraser's field, the bamboo-turned Windsor rocker shown in Plate 11A may be taken as the prototype of the Boston. Lockwood dates this form as early as 1800. It has a flat seat with rounded front, and a high back of straight spindles surmounted by a framed top. Contemporaneous with this were the



PLATE 20

High-back type of late Windsor rocker (about 1820), showing the emergence of Boston-rocker details—curved arms, bent spindles, and flat, broad head-piece. Owned by Miss L. M. Neyhart. (See also Plate 14B)

THE EMERGENCE OF THE BOSTON

“stepped” Windsor rocking-chairs described by Mrs. Fraser and shown in Plates 12A and 12B. In some respects they approach even more closely to a hint of the later Boston forms. Out of these, and later forms of the Windsor rocker with the broadened top slat, grew the variations in back, seat, and arms that later marked the familiar Boston rocker.

Though there are several missing links in this evolution, its main trend is fairly clear. My dates, however, must be taken as approximate. They are based largely on circumstantial evidence, supported by Mrs. Fraser’s careful study and dating of stencil decorations.

Soon after 1800 a horizontal slat at the top of the back became more common than the frame top. Sometimes the top line of this was broken by a raised section (stepped), as shown in Plates 12A, 12B, and 13A. Somewhere between 1810 and 1820, as the original Windsor characteristics became less and less marked, a broad rectangular head-piece was often used, as shown in Plates 14B and 20. Then this rectangular head-piece

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

was steamed and bent in a shallow curve and the hitherto straight spindles also were steamed and bent to fit the back. This may be taken as the real point of transition.

About 1825 an Empire touch seems to have been added to the entire chair (the influence of the French Empire style was still strong in this country), and we find rocking-chairs with rolling crest, seat, and arms—the early Boston. Some of the most elaborate and handsomest forms appeared at this time. The head-piece was often scrolled or molded and shaped at the ends. (See Plate 21.)

Then, as the rocking-chair began to become more a matter of quantity production, material was conserved and work simplified. A plainer head-piece came into vogue, developing at length, about 1835, into the standard head-piece of the late Boston (Plates 24B to 25B) with the top rounded and the straight bottom edge cut with two semicircular notches.

It should be stated, however, that these changes offer no definite lines of demarcation, nor is it safe

THE EMERGENCE OF THE BOSTON

to be arbitrary about dates. Always the country districts lagged behind the cities in adopting new fashions, and a chair factory in Vermont might have been using a design in 1860 that had been superseded in Boston in 1840. Earlier forms of head-piece persisted after later forms came in, and the puzzling thing about it all is that different forms were undoubtedly made at the same time, while early and late details may sometimes be found on the same chair.

Plate 22A, for example, shows the early flat seat and straight spindles, while the head-piece is well away from the roll form and approaching the late Boston type. Since this chair bears the mark of Hitchcock, Alford & Co., it could not have been made before 1829, though rocking-chairs of this same type have been found bearing the earlier Hitchcock mark. Plate 22B, on the other hand, shows the later rolling seat and bent spindles, but a curved and rolling head-piece. I should date it about 1830. It appears, then, that neither the flat seat nor the rolling head-piece may be taken as an absolute criterion of age.

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

Mrs. Fraser's Pennsylvania rocking-chair shown in Plate 15A is an offshoot of this development rather than a transitional form, since she dates it as late as 1830. It has a flat seat with straight front, but the spindles are bent, the arms have the typical Boston roll, and the head-piece is not unlike that of the later Boston.

The flat seat with rounded front undoubtedly came first, but it persisted after the rolling seat came in. Between 1825 and 1840 the same stencil decorations are to be found on rocking-chairs with both kinds of seats, suggesting that some makers or some customers preferred the flat and some the rolling seat. Mrs. Fraser has found a stencil of the 1840 type on a chair with a flat seat, though I believe the rolling seat had become almost universal by that time.

While the transition from the earlier to the later forms of head-piece may be traced, I have no evidence suggesting a gradual transition from the flat to the rolling seat. There seems to be no form half-way between the two. About 1825 (the date is determined by Mrs. Fraser's stencil evidence)



PLATE 21

A splendid example of the early true Boston rocker (about 1825), with rolling seat, rolling crest, and fine stenciling. Owned by Miss Lila Page

THE EMERGENCE OF THE BOSTON

the rolling seat rather abruptly appeared in virtually the same form that it maintained for forty years or more. I am unable to say who invented or first used it. Certainly it was promptly copied and became widely popular. Comfort as well as grace recommended it. I fancy it was a definitely American idea, though it has about it the look of Empire derivation.

This rolling wooden seat, shown clearly in most of our illustrations, is perhaps the most decidedly typical feature of the Boston rocker. The main part of the seat is made of a flat plank, but the back portion curving upward to support the spindles and the front portion curving downward produce the effect of a continuous cyma curve.

One of my correspondents believes that the first rolling seats were carved out of one solid piece of pumpkin pine. This may quite possibly be so, though I have never seen a one-piece rolling seat. In any case, the chair-makers soon learned to conserve material by building up the front and back portions with separate pieces, so that the typical rolling seat is made of three pieces of

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

wood. This is structurally more sound, anyway, as the front and back strips, with the grain running transversely, help to prevent the main portion from checking and splitting—a common defect, even so, in old Bostons.

While the up-curved portion of the rolling seat supports the spindles, the stiles are brought forward to the main portion of the seat to give greater strength. The arms, which join the stiles, early took on the typical form—a shallow cyma curve, with the front end rolling over to fit the hand and the whole following more or less the lines of the rolling seat. In fact, the arm seems to have been the first part of the chair to take on Boston features, the rolling arm often appearing on Windsor rockers and others of 1800 or thereabouts having the flat seat. (See frontispiece and Plates 12A, 12B, 13B, 14A, and 14B.)

The arm is usually attached to a stout turned support in front and a slenderer one midway. Rarely variations appear in the arms. Occasionally one finds two inner supports instead of one and I have seen chairs on which the arm was joined

THE EMERGENCE OF THE BOSTON

to the front support in a continuous curve without the front overhang. Plate 23B, which illustrates this variation in the arms, is a rather late type popular in Pennsylvania and Western markets.

There were also variations in the degrees of bend in the spindles.

As has been already stated, the earlier Boston rockers show more variations in form and detail than the later ones. As we approach 1840 we continue to find interesting variations, particularly in chairs made in the more remote districts, but in general the Boston rocker was appearing more and more in a standard form. Plate 23A may be taken as an example of the turn in this direction. This chair, with its finely preserved decoration, bears the mark of Hitchcock, Alford & Co., and was therefore made between 1829 and 1843—probably somewhere about 1840. With the exception of the head-piece, which is a survival of the early scroll forms considerably modified, this chair is very nearly of the typical mid-century type which will be dealt with in the next chapter.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LATER BOSTONS

THE form of the Boston rocker, though the chairs were made in widely separated places, became pretty generally standardized after 1840, when what I have called the late or mid-century form, already described, became prevalent. From then until about 1865—and to a less extent later—Boston rockers were made in great quantities and were widely distributed by peddlers. The price was low, particularly for chairs not elaborately decorated, and nearly every home owned one or more of them. I have received letters which testify to the fact that in two or three places Boston rockers were made as late as 1890. The demand for them among old-fashioned country people was slow to die out.

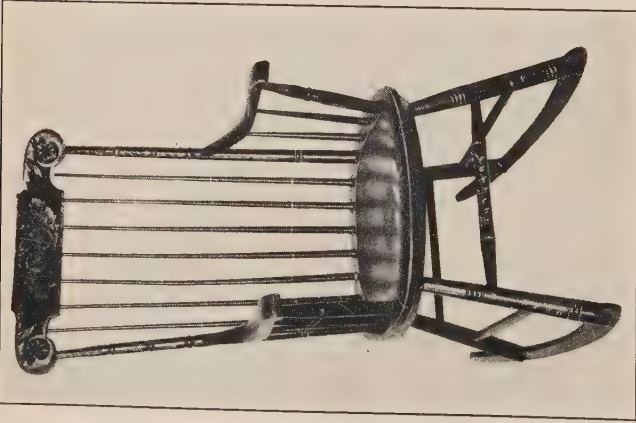


PLATE 22A

Stenciled Boston rocker of about 1830, made by Hitchcock, Alford & Co., with the early flat, rounded seat and straight spindles, but with a head-piece

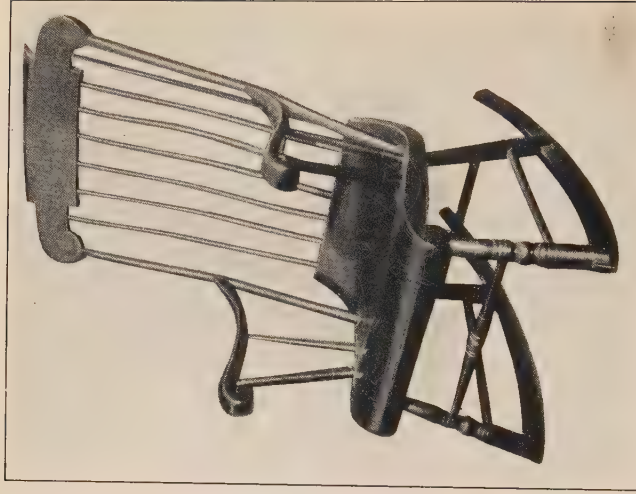


PLATE 22B

A Boston rocker of about 1830, made of birch and whitewood, showing the rolling seat and bent spindles in combination with the early scrolled head-piece. Owned by A. Rickard

THE LATER BOSTONS

As chair factories increased in size, and quantity production became more common, there were a number of factories, including Hitchcock's, that shipped chairs in knock-down form to distant points. Mrs. Fraser has suggested to me that this may account, in a measure, for the wide-spread standardization of the Boston rocker. She calls attention to the fact that in 1831, and perhaps before, Thomas Basset & Co., of Lee, Massachusetts, manufactured fancy- and Windsor-chair materials and advertised parts for forty-five thousand sets of chairs annually. While these sets were doubtless straight chairs, it is altogether likely that so large a house a little later turned out quantities of rocking-chair parts of uniform design.

After 1840 or 1845, cane-seated Bostons were not uncommon, the square of cane being woven on a frame of four pieces, with the rolling pieces added at front and back, making six pieces of wood in the seat. (See Plate 25B.) Plate 24A shows one of these cane-seated rockers with a very unusual head-piece of exaggerated curves.

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

It suggests some of the early elaborate forms, but is in reality a late variation, other features indicating that the chair was made about 1845-50.

Another common variation was the so-called "little Boston," with no arms and with only five spindles between the stiles. (Plates 27A and 27B.) Little Bostons were smaller in all their dimensions than the regulation Boston and were popular for bedrooms. I have heard them called "nurse rockers" or "nursing-chairs."

Occasionally one sees on porches in New England a late type of Boston rocker with the typical rolling seat and turned legs, but with squared stiles and with a vase-shaped splat in place of the spindles. The splat resembles that used on so-called American Empire chairs in the early part of the century, and has suggested to some casual observers an earlier date than would seem to be warranted. As a matter of fact, chairs of this type were probably not made before 1845, and most of them much later, the urn-shaped splat being merely a survival of an earlier detail.

Plate 29A shows a chair of this sort found in

THE LATER BOSTONS

Connecticut. The material is good maple and whitewood, and the chair is well constructed and apparently not a machine product. Most splat-back Bostons, however, were of a very late, coarse, and degenerate type, obviously machine-made and heavier and less graceful than the spindle form. Usually they are painted a solid color, though stenciled examples are to be found. They appear to be common in the Middle West and are said to have been made in Cincinnati factories in the fifties and sixties (Plates 28A and 28B).

Plate 29B is a curiosity rather than a type. It is clumsy and rather degenerate in form, and difficult to date. The right arm suggests that of the Windsor writing-chair. This rocker was doubtless made to order to suit the individual need of some customer.

Most of the Boston rockers were made with pine or whitewood seats, while legs, spindles, stretchers, and arms were of maple, oak, hickory, or ash. Sometimes the arm rests were of cherry or apple-wood and were in natural finish, while

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

the rest of the chair was painted. After 1840 some Bostons were made wholly of maple and were finished natural. All of those of this type which I have seen had cane seats and a sufficient family resemblance to suggest that they may all have come from a single factory.

The most desirable Bostons, of course, are the stenciled ones, and there is a good deal of difference in the quality of the stenciling. The earlier forms especially were decorated in this way, some coarsely but most of them beautifully. Plates 21 and 22A show examples of this fine early work while 24A is the coarser type. Combinations of fruit, flowers, and scrolls were common (Plates 21 and 27B). Plate 26 shows a type of conventional decorative stenciling often found on late forms, these examples being somewhat better done than most of their period. Plate 23B shows a somewhat unusual combination of stenciling and hand-painting, the center cartouche on the back being painted with naturalistic flowers.

Variations from the fruit and flower forms are sometimes the most interesting, such as land-

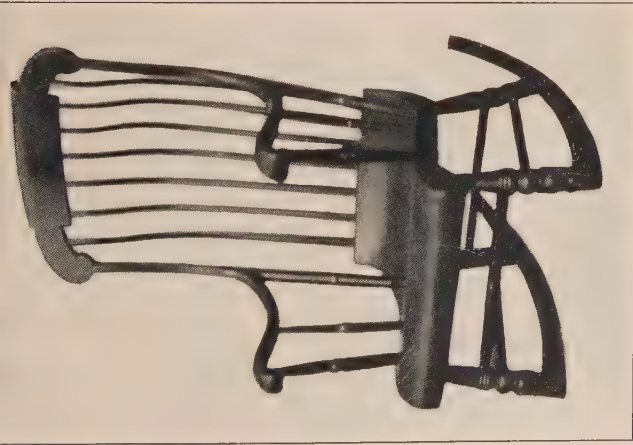


PLATE 23A

Stenciled Boston rocker made about 1840 by Hitchcock, Alford & Co., with head-piece of a somewhat earlier type. Owned by Mrs. Guion Thompson

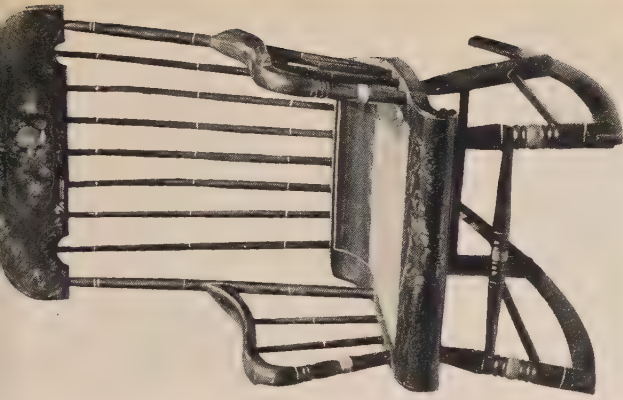


PLATE 23B

A later Boston rocker with cane seat, decorated with a design of naturalistic flowers, and with arms that form a continuous line with the front support

THE LATER BOSTONS

scapes, animals, stage-coaches, and the like. Plates 25A and 25B are charming examples of the landscape design. The latter shows, flanked by fine scrollwork, a village scene which is an excellent example of the Hudson River school of landscape art. It is said to represent a scene in the village of Boxford, Massachusetts. This chair, by the way, has not only the cane seat but an unusual variation in the number of spindles in the back—six in place of the regulation seven—and the back is lower and broader than the average. Plate 24A shows a chair once finely stenciled which has been unhappily retouched with bronze paint, a common but undesirable form of amateur restoration. The design is essentially the same, but the technique has been ruined.

Another stenciled Boston I own bears a landscape at the left of which is a small house or cabin. In the doorway two men, one of them with a peg leg, appear to be carrying on some sort of transaction. One friend insists that this is a Victorian bootlegger and his customer. In front is a barrel marked "hard cider." I am in-

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

clined to think that this has some reference to the presidential campaign of 1840, when the log cabin and cider barrel, as political emblems, appeared frequently on glass flasks and cup-plates.

Stenciling of greater or less excellence is not infrequently to be found on the later Bostons, but more often these chairs were painted black or some dark color with or without some simple form of decoration. Sometimes they were embellished with a narrow gold line or stripe following the outline of seat and head-piece. A few had in addition a band of color or gold along the edge. Others were painted reddish brown and "grained." I know of one Boston rocker, owned by the Amherst (Massachusetts) Historical Society, which is painted white with gold lines and was doubtless intended for chamber use. Still another that I have seen was given a spatter effect in dark gray.

Many chairs found to-day painted in solid color may originally have been decorated with stenciling, but they were in constant use and the decorations wore off and the whole was freshened

THE LATER BOSTONS

up with a coat of paint. The presence of original stenciling is often due to the thrifty custom of protecting the seat with a pad and the back with a tidy.

No one has been able to tell me where the first Boston rocker was made, but I am inclined to think that it came from Connecticut rather than from Boston. Eventually nearly every chair shop in Massachusetts and Connecticut was turning out Boston rockers and some were made in Vermont. They are found so often in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana that it is not likely their manufacture was confined to New England. In fact, I have learned of chair factories operating in Cincinnati as early as 1831, which probably turned out Boston rockers, or at least the splat-back Bostons, after 1850. Whether or not they were made in Maine and New Hampshire I do not know, but they probably were.

I have, indeed, made no attempt to compile a list of Boston-rocker makers, though it would be an interesting thing to do. A few sources are

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

known. In Connecticut Lambert Hitchcock is said to have made Boston rockers between 1826 and 1829 (see footnote on page 78), and I believe at least one has been found which bears his name. It is known that during the régime of Hitchcock, Alford & Co. (1829-43) Boston rockers were among the products of the factory, including both big and little Bostons and some fine stenciled ones.

Boston rockers were also fashioned by William Raidhart, foreman for the Camps (Union Chair Company) at Winsted, Connecticut, but chiefly after 1850. Richardson & Dike of Montague, Massachusetts, were making Boston rockers about 1854, and some of the stencils found in their mill are of a type twenty years older. I have recently been informed that the Twinflower Antique Shop at South Newbury, Vermont, is located in an old chair factory. Dated stencils and parts of unfinished chairs were found there by the present owners, and the records would seem to indicate that Boston rockers were made there for the remote rural trade as late as 1890. The task of dis-

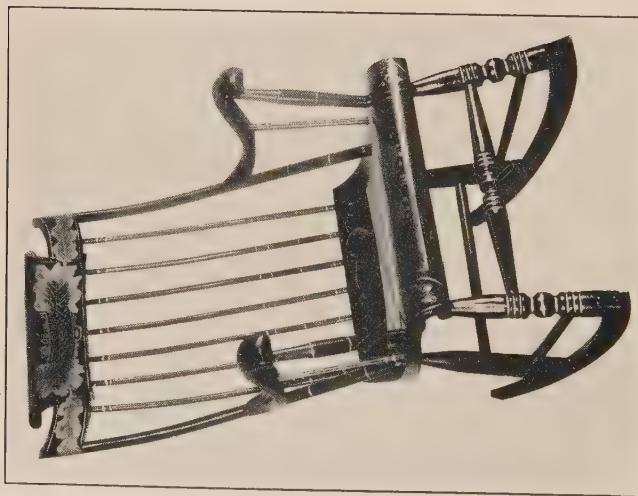


PLATE 24A

Stenciled Boston (1845-50) with cane seat, unusual turnings, and very unusual head-piece

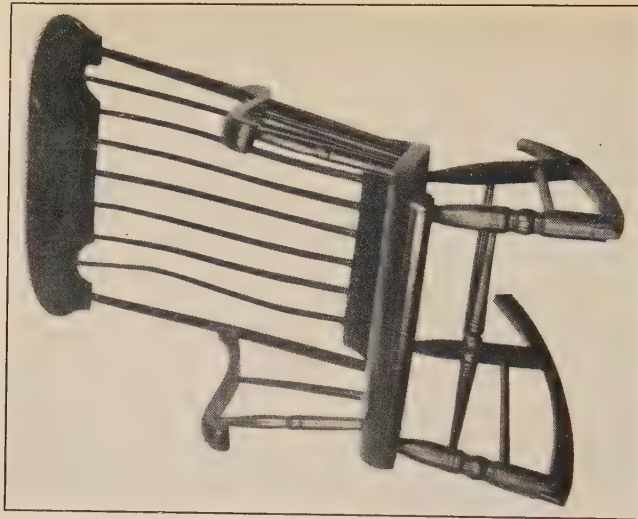


PLATE 24B

Commonest form of late Boston (about 1850), found in central Massachusetts. Originally painted

THE LATER BOSTONS

covering other sources must be left for future investigation.

Such is the story of the Boston rocker so far as I have been able to piece it together. The form of the chair is familiar, but its history is curiously elusive. It forms, however, such an important item in the development of nineteenth-century furniture design in this country, and is arousing so much interest on the part of collectors of American antiques, that I am led to hope that further enlightenment will be forthcoming and that the complete story will one day be told.

CHAPTER IX

SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

WE have come, naturally enough, to associate the word "antique" with the idea of collecting as a hobby, but I should like, for the moment, to dissociate the two. Collecting, whether it be old masters or postage-stamps, rare books or butterflies, is something that not all of us have the time or patience or interest or money to indulge in. But four people out of five, in these last two decades, have come to take a greater or less interest in antiques, not as collectors but as ordinary home-makers. They have come to realize that a touch of antiquity may lend distinction to a modern home and that there is an element of beauty and excellence in old furniture that is not to be found in new. They have come to wish their homes to be interesting as well as artistic, and venerable

SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

things of good design do often add the needed touch.

In other words, one need not be a collector or a connoisseur in order to be interested in old furniture and to find joy in its possession. Collecting as a fad has been somewhat overdone, and there have been times when I have felt a very definite distaste for the word "antique." There is unquestionably a saner way of looking at old things and estimating their value and usefulness.

But even when we have eliminated the element of collecting, we are not out of the woods. What is an antique, anyway? It all depends on the point of view. The man who has built a house with tiled floors, groined ceilings, monastic archways, and gray-plaster walls, and has furnished it with Italian Renaissance chairs and dower chests and tall brass candlesticks, and hung red damask altar fronts from Spain upon the walls, too often believes that he is the only genuine devotee of the antique. He feels a bit superior to what we used to call the Colonial. Yet there may be something to be said for more

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

modest venturings into the realm of recent antiquity. Atmosphere is what we are after, and even a Terry clock and a blue Staffordshire plate may give that. We cannot all afford Italian Renaissance or pure Tudor, and great age is not the only criterion of excellence or usefulness.

What age does a piece of furniture or china have to attain before it may be classed as an antique? That is a question that has begun to puzzle dealers and collectors alike. There was a time when nothing made after 1800 was considered genuinely antique. Then Americans began to insist upon treasuring so-called American Empire furniture and other products of the early nineteenth century, and the date was advanced to 1830.

For some time, later things were not sought by collectors and had little or no money value in the antique market, but interest in them was not to be withstood, and gradually the date crept up toward 1850. Because American pottery was a rare article at best, and because of the activities of a few collectors, Bennington pottery, much of it

PLATE 25A

Typical example of late Boston rocker (1845-50), with an elaborate and well-preserved landscape stenciled on the head-piece. Owned by Mrs. Louis Green



PLATE 25B

Stenciled Boston rocker with natural-wood arms, cane seat, and only six spindles, with a village scene on the head-piece. Owned by Walter A. Dyer



SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

made after 1850, entered the field and acquired an antique value. The same was true of commemorative bottles and flasks, and, more recently, of Currier & Ives prints. With the third quarter of the nineteenth century thus tapped, further developments were inevitable.

The question is still an open one. The late J. B. Kerfoot, in his book on American pewter, said, "An antique may be any specimen of handicraft that belongs to a closed period." But that seems a little like dodging the issue. It is too wide-open a definition, that would admit Columbian half dollars and even Model T Ford cars. It seems necessary to fix the date arbitrarily somewhere, and at present it seems to be hovering about 1870-75. Dealers and connoisseurs in the older things will not admit this, but so the great American public has decreed.

The older we grow, the more things may justifiably be classed as antiques. The Civil War period has been receding farther and farther into the past, and people interested in American antiques have begun to pay attention more and more

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

to mid-century objects. A considerable trade has recently grown up in this field and these younger antiques have begun to acquire a market value. Many a person who despairs of collecting the older treasures, with their high prices, may be comforted to learn that furniture, china, glassware, etc., of a later day are no longer being scorned and may be restored to a place of honor and dignity in the home.

One of the objections to admitting these younger articles to the honorable company of antiques has been that many of them were inferior artistically to the older things. While this is partially true, it is not entirely so. We have ceased to lump everything Victorian as bad, and the collector or householder with good taste and a discriminating eye is finding it possible to pick from the varied products of this period pieces that are well worth preserving and that are bound to increase in value as time goes on.

That is why we are beginning to find on display in the antique shops objects that would have been kept out of sight a few years ago—Victor-

SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

ian parlor furniture of rosewood and black walnut, Hitchcock chairs, late pottery and porcelain, late blown and pressed glass, souvenir flasks, millefiori paper-weights, mid-century lithographs and engravings, Rogers groups, and hand-woven coverlets and hooked rugs of no great antiquity. And in our modern homes these things are beginning to find their place.

If Bennington pottery and Currier prints are accepted as antiques, as they certainly are, then the Boston rocker is an antique. Its beginnings go back a hundred years and the day of its greatest popularity was known to a generation now gone or passing. It has more than its age to recommend it, however. Though never considered an elegant piece of furniture, it has something quaint and domestic about it, something grandmotherly, and its proportions are pleasing. I think it is safe to predict a growing popularity for it.

To the collector of old American furniture, the Windsor rocking-chairs and earlier Bostons will undoubtedly have the strongest appeal, not only

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

because of their greater antiquity and rarity, but because of their greater beauty and interest of design. They were more graceful than the later forms; they were hand-made and hence exhibit greater individuality. The character and condition of the stencil decoration, too, will serve as a criterion among collectors.

Nevertheless, I do not consider the later Bostons entirely lacking in interest and charm. I am not too proud to sit in one of an evening, and can testify to its comfort. The late Bostons were the result of standardization and quantity production, but they have at least the virtue of being easily obtainable in these days when so much old furniture is getting beyond the reach of the average person.

What is a Boston rocker worth? Experience teaches me that this is the first question to be asked by most persons whose interest has been newly aroused, and it is a question impossible to answer with any definiteness. Values in antiques are always fluctuating as the local demand increases or subsides, and the same object may have one

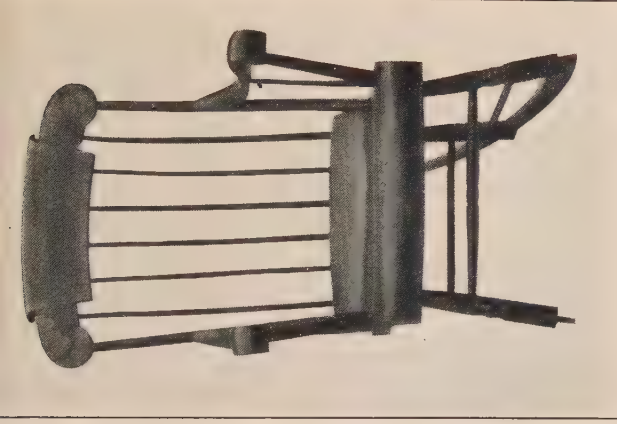
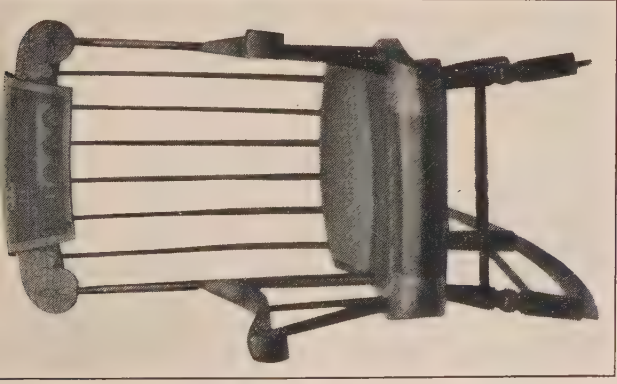


PLATE 26

Two six-spindle Boston rockers of late date (after 1850), but with an early form of head-piece bearing stencil designs of the landscape type. They bear the label of the Union Chair Co., West Winsted, Conn. Owned by William Stuart Walcott, Jr.

SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

value in a remote country attic, another in a small-town shop, and still another on Madison Avenue, New York. There is no stable standard of value for any antique. I may say, however, that I have seen late Bostons priced all the way from twelve to eighteen dollars in shops, and twenty to twenty-five dollars asked for stenciled chairs. The highest price I have seen placed on an early stenciled Boston is thirty-five dollars. Late Bostons without stenciling may still be picked up in New England for five dollars apiece.

These figures mean little or nothing, however. By the time this book is published they may be doubled—or they may not. Boston rockers are cheap enough at present, judged by any standard, but I expect the demand for them to increase noticeably within a short time. If I am not much mistaken, the dealers will be after them before long and they will be appearing in New York shops and along the Boston Post Road. Then they will become rare and high-priced, like the Windsors. Now is the time to acquire Boston rockers.

There is one factor affecting values in antiques

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

which has not been fully considered, perhaps. Formerly market values were fixed by collectors. When several of them hit upon the same hobby, and desired the same rare articles, the market value of those articles naturally soared. To-day, where there is one collector or connoisseur in the market there are ten amateurs looking for home furnishings. As a consequence, demand and value are now determined not alone by beauty, artistic merit, age, or rarity but also by adaptability to modern use. That is why a hand-woven coverlet which is useful as a modern couch cover is worth more than a Paisley shawl which is not. And that is why the Boston rocker, which is eminently adaptable to the uses of a modern home, is likely to meet with a livelier demand and to experience a more sudden increase in market value than certain older and rarer but less useful things. In the case of the older rocking-chairs, however, the factors of rarity, beauty, historic interests, and adaptability are all operative, and what may happen to the market value of those it would be folly to attempt to predict.

Part III
ADDENDA



I

SOME NOTES ON STENCIL DECORATIONS

DECORATIVE design is a fascinating study. As a child of thirteen I studied design from Owen Jones's "Grammar of Ornament" and found it not difficult to tell the nationalities of different designs wherever I saw them. With more intensive study it becomes possible to ascertain not only nationalities but dates at which the decorations were executed. It is fascinating to me that a decorator cannot conceal his true identity, even though he may be copying some design several centuries old. To the expert, the decoration will reveal itself for just what it is—a more or less faithful copy, not the original. For this reason it becomes important to

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

preserve the original paint wherever possible, touching up only those places where the paint is entirely missing.

Free-hand decoration, of course, is the most interesting type to study, because it not only tells us the nationality and date of the decorator, but also reveals more of his ability and personality. Stenciling is not so satisfactory as free-hand design, in that large-scale mechanical production subordinates the individuality of the decorator. Modern stenciling is inflexible, but the bronze stenciling used in old-time decoration had different possibilities of technique that enable us to place an approximate date upon it.

The earliest use of bronze on American painted furniture appears to be a free-hand and not a stencil process. I have observed several examples where it was employed quite in the manner of gold-leaf and used without stencil patterns. However the combination of bronze powders and stencils may have started, it was in use almost everywhere from 1817 to 1865 or 1870.

Early stencil designs dating from 1817 to 1825

NOTES ON STENCIL DECORATIONS

are characterized chiefly by their delicacy and their careful shading. These early designs are well composed, often consisting of a bowl or a basket containing fruit and flowers of many varieties. The leaves or sprays of leaves are beautifully cut, and the bronze is carefully shaded to bring out high lights in the proper places. Those who handle stencils know that this effect is not easily achieved. Leaves that have "modeled" veins are not so rapidly applied as those which have the veins superimposed with a single separate stencil. This early type of stenciling is to be seen on the fine Boston rocker in Plate 22A.

Between 1825 and 1830 a new method of design composition, not so artistic as the last and by no means so involved, was adopted to gain speed. These designs are composed by what I call a "hit-or-miss" method. An important fruit or flower was selected for the center of the design, and this was flanked by minor fruit, flowers, and leaves, until the desired space was filled. Stem lines and other details by which free-hand designs are carefully composed, are here miss-

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

ing, so that we may consider this hit-or-miss method a product of the period where rapid production was more valuable than careful designing.

To be sure, the bowl and basket designs did not disappear at this date, but with everything else they suffered certain changes that show their later date. Instead of the dainty details cut to decorate the earlier bowls and baskets, we find coarsened details that could be more rapidly cut. And the fruit within these bowls is not so varied, but consists of only two or three kinds instead of five or six. Repetition is noticeable in these later-type designs. By repeating the use of the same motif within a design, speed may be attained. It is quicker to re-apply the stencil you hold in your hand than to lay it down and select a different one.

By the year 1835 stenciling begins to run away with itself: the speed which caused its original popularity now causes its downfall. By increasing the *size* of a design, more bronze may be applied without involving any more labor; also, a large-sized stencil may be more quickly cut than a tiny

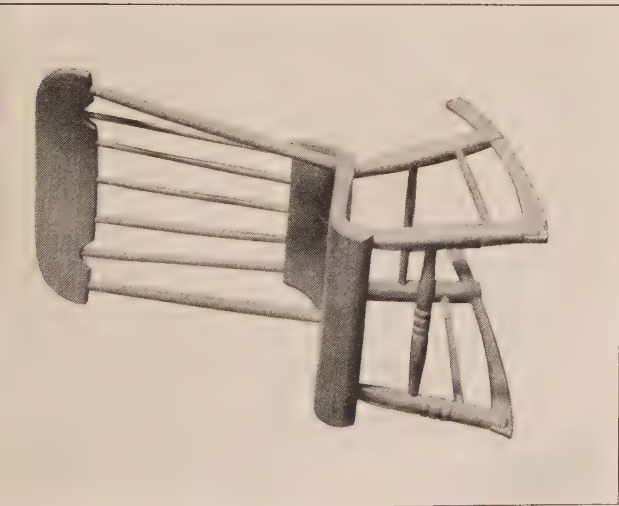


PLATE 27A

Simplest form of "little Boston" or "nursing chair," with rockers worn nearly through by use. Owned by Walter A. Dyer

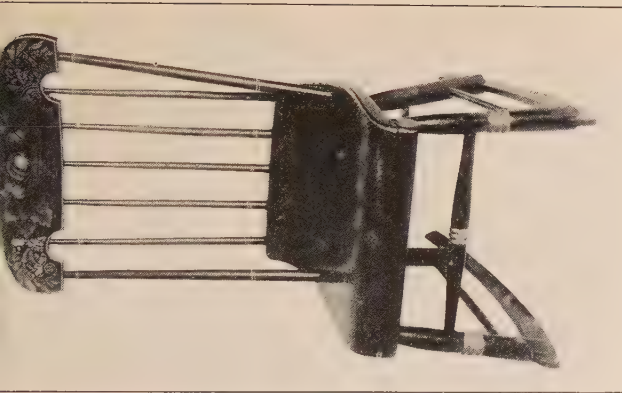


PLATE 27B

A "little Boston" stenciled with the fruit-and-scroll combination typical of the late period. Owned by Mrs. Richard Lennihan

NOTES ON STENCIL DECORATIONS

one. So we find 1835 to 1840 rocking-chairs are quite covered with bronze decoration of no dainty size. The characteristic Boston rocker head-piece is overbalancing in importance to the rest of the chair.

One thing in Boston rocking-chair decoration has come to my attention. By the design at the curved ends of the top slat, I find an indication of date. In the early examples I observe a simple rosette. Gradually there appears a curling leaf, in combination with a more or less modified rosette. By 1835 the curling leaf becomes a series of jagged points, and is used alone, without a circular motif. By 1845 the single curving leaf has developed into an elaborate scroll design decidedly involved and somewhat meaningless. This scroll is a product of the French school of designing and was brought into popularity during the French revival of 1845.

On the best chairs of the 1845 period there were two types of decoration combined with the stenciled scroll design. One type was the free-hand naturalistically painted flowers so much used by

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

French decorators. It was the first design in natural shaded colors that had been used on American chairs since the Adam-Hepplewhite period. I think that the general public had tired of so much bronze stenciling and felt the need of something more varied. The other type of design appearing on our 1845 Boston rockers is the landscape of pleasing variety.

Landscape design was in line with the decoration of English Staffordshire plates. Also, the Hudson River school of painting was making landscapes popular; so it is not to be wondered at that landscapes should appear on furniture. Stenciled landscapes are like the theorem painting taught to most young ladies of that time. The only difference is that colored bronze powders were employed instead of oil or water-colors in paste form. In the bronze landscapes we find a blending of powders that range from silver to light gold, green gold, copper, fire, and dark bronze. The play of one against another makes an interesting effect not easily copied.

After 1850 decoration met with a serious de-

NOTES ON STENCIL DECORATIONS

cline. The demands of speedy production began to be so insistent that painted decoration was either done away with entirely or reduced to the lowest terms. Designs were so rapidly cut that frequently they were utterly meaningless. A leaf became a series of jagged points, and the spaces between the parts of a design became more noticeable than the design itself. In other words, the design did not hang together, but was characterized by the disconnecting of its parts. A stencil was generally cut so that it could be laid on in one application, rather than be composed as the earlier stenciled designs were. Composition requires time and greater skill.

Of the designs found in Montague at the Dike Mill, those examples that were published all fall into this later-than-1850 class. Mr. Dyer contends that some of them are of an earlier type. Perhaps they are; not having observed them all, I can make no assertion. Suffice it to say that most of the chairs turned out at the Dike Mill came after 1850 and their designs show them typical of the period.

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

The process of bronze stenciling seems to have been a carefully guarded trade secret until the present time. And even now there are not many people who know the technique. How a design can be applied without using a brush is beyond the comprehension of many. Yet this very technique makes possible the application of far more delicate designs than modern stencils would permit. The early method of composing a stencil design from separate units is so effective that many people do not recognize the decoration as a stencil process. The stiff, unyielding formality of modern stenciling is quite lacking in designs that were executed before 1850. The one quality noticeable in antique bronze stenciling is the curiously subtle way in which the motifs are shaded from brilliant high lights to such deep shadows that they fade into obscurity. Gold leaf—of such rich luster—cannot be so shaded, but must be etched in black or given a burnt-sienna shadow. As long as bronze stenciling made use of the possibilities of shading, it remained an excellent method of decorating. But when stencils were

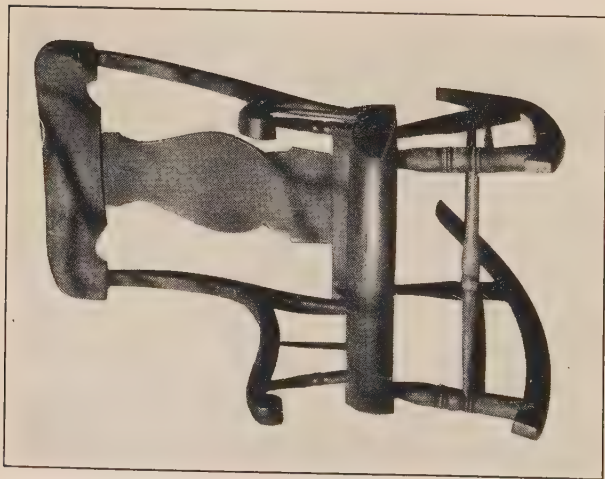


PLATE 28A

Typical example of the splat-back Boston common in the Middle West, with squared stiles. Owned by Mrs. Enoch Myers

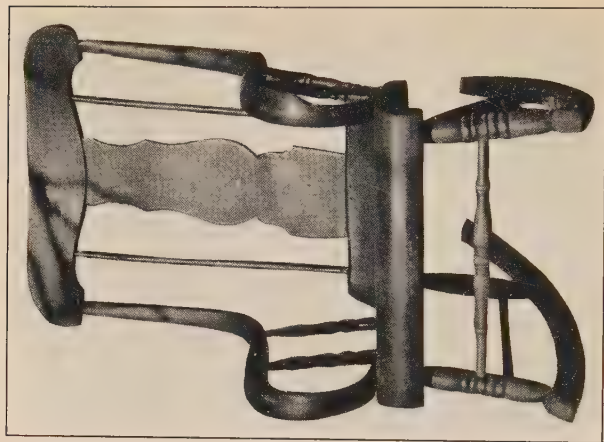


PLATE 28B

Stenciled variant of the splat-back Boston, with two spindles and with arms and stiles continuous. Owned by Mrs. Enoch Myers

NOTES ON STENCIL DECORATIONS

applied—as they were in 1850 or after—without this careful shading, bronze fell into a decline from which it is only now beginning to recover.

E. S. F.



NOTE: The above design and that at the head of page 113 are stencils for Boston rocker head-pieces, found in the Dike Mill at Montagne, Mass.

II

ADVERTISEMENTS

Following are a few old newspaper advertisements that contain information concerning various types of chairs and their makers:

[1810] Fancy Chair Store. William Buttre, No. 17, Bowery-Lane, near the Watch-House, New-York, has constantly for sale, A large assortment of elegant, well-made, and highly finished Black, White, Brown, Coquelico, Gold and Fancy Chairs, Settees, Conversation, Elbow, Rocking, Sewing, Windsor, and Children's Chairs of every description, and on the most moderate terms.

—Longworth's Directory of New York City, 1810.

[1811] A lot of new and 2nd hand furniture: High Post field and Lowpost Bedsteads, light and wash hand stands; with a great variety of fancy Bamboo fan back and Rocking chairs.

—"Boston Patriot," June 8, 1811.

[1831] . . . Fancy Windsor and Rocking chairs . . .

—"Boston Commercial Gazette," March 7, 1831.

[1831] 84 Patent Scroll seat Rocking Chairs. Rosewood and Imitation maple.

—"Boston Commercial Gazette," August 8, 1831.

ADVERTISEMENTS

[1833] A genteel collection of Furniture consisting of 8 handsome Grecian couches; 30 mahogany chairs; 3 *spring seat rocking chairs*; 2 musical stools; 3 mahogany dinner Horse and Trays; 5 mahogany toilet tables; 4 do. Dineing Tables; mahogany Bureaus; Fancy chairs; 4 Philadelphia Looking Glasses.

—"Independent Chronicle—Boston Patriot," January 2, 1833.

[1842] . . . Black Walnut Rocking Chairs . . .

—"Atlas," January 29, 1842.

[1845] A good assortment of BOSTON ROCKERS of our own manufacture.

—"Bridgeport Standard," July 28, 1845.

[1845] BOSTON ROCKERS of their own manufacture, warranted to be made and finished a little ahead of anything in this State.

—"Bridgeport Standard," July 28, 1845."

III

CHAIR-MAKERS IN 1831

Each large city contained many small chair shops. In Philadelphia, in the year 1796 there were thirty-one chair-makers. Other cities, such as Boston, Salem, Newport, Hartford, New York, etc., were also manufacturing fancy, Windsor, and rocking-chairs. The list given below is quoted to show the distribution of chair-makers over certain sections of the country not covered by the city directories. This list cannot be considered complete, as every manufacturer did not consider it worth while to advertise in this directory, but the larger and more important firms are probably here represented.

The American Advertising Directory for the year 1831 contains the names of the following chair-makers, who may all have been turning out rocking-chairs, particularly of the Boston rocker type:

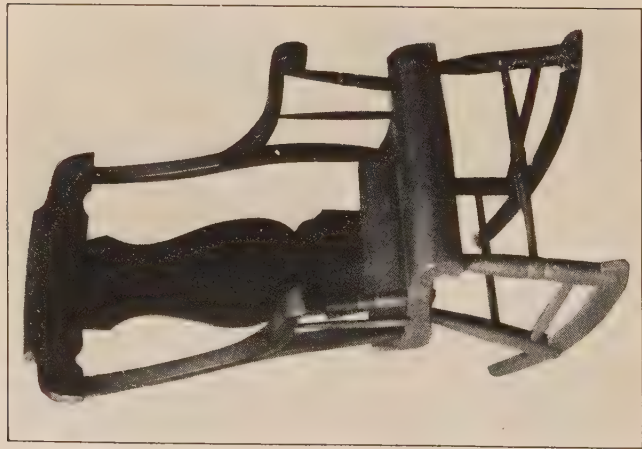


PLATE 29A

A splat-back Boston from Connecticut,
made of maple, white-painted. Owned by
Mrs. Enoch Myers.



PLATE 29B

A curiosity—a rocking-chair of the Boston type with
writing arm and foot rest. Owned by Mrs. Enoch Myers.

CHAIR-MAKERS IN 1831

- Allen and Co. Norwich, Conn.
Basset, Thomas & Co. . . Lee, Berkshire County,
Massachusetts
*Manufacturers of all kinds of Fancy and Windsor
chairs. Materials for 45,000 sets annually*
- Bulkley, Edward New Haven, Conn.
Churchill & Co., D. . . . Stockbridge, Mass.
*Manufacture chairs of all descriptions. Shipping
merchants furnished on most reasonable terms.
From 12,000 to 13,000 manufactured annually*
- Congdon & Tracy Norwich Falls, Conn.
Cunningham, Wm. Wheeling, West Va.
Fancy chair and cabinet manufacturer
- English, Benjamin New Haven, Conn.
Gill, B. 35 S. Charles St., Baltimore,
Maryland
*Dentist; also manufacturer of Fancy and Windsor
chairs*
- Gill and Halfpenny Baltimore, Md.
Harrison, Israel New Haven, Conn.
Hitchcock, Lambert Hitchcocksville, Conn.
*Manufacturer and vender of chairs of all kinds;
Shipping merchants and Southern Traders fur-
nished on the most reasonable terms. About 15,000
made annually*

THE ROCKING-CHAIR

Holden, Edward P., Boston, Mass.
Chairmaker.

Jackson, Francis Easton, Pa.

Morrison, Freds. 244 Greenwich St.,
New York

Fancy and Windsor chair manufacturer

Monroe and Jones Auburn, N. Y.

Parker, Thomas M. 117 Westminster St.,
Providence, R. I.

Chair manufacturer and painter

Robb, J. W. Wheeling, West Va.

Fancy chair manufacturer

Sewell, Thomas H. 13 Sharp St.,
Baltimore, Md.

*Manufacturer of Fancy and Windsor chairs of
every description; also chairs for exportation*

Shepard, Edw. Wethersfield, Conn.

Smith, Abraham Easton, Pa.

Street, Thaddeus Cheshire, Conn.

Troxel, E. Buffalo, N. Y.

Tweed and Bonnel 5 Cherry St., New York

Fancy and Windsor chair manufacturers

Wadsworth and Penegan Buffalo, N. Y.

Warner, John Princeton, N. J.

Painter and chair maker

CHAIR-MAKERS IN 1831

Washbourn, M. Catskill, N. Y.

Chair painter and Glazier

Western Chair Manu- Cincinnati, Ohio
factory

Whitney & Brown Boston, Mass.

2812-17B
52

ROL 0289 1944

111420

S 749.1
D

~~MAY 14 1980~~

ROL 111420
DYER
ROCKING-CHAIR, AND AMERICAN
INSTITUTION cd 2

S 749.1

Dy
THF
I

AUG 28 '69 AL
CF Porter Doss ML
MAR 7 1974 ILL
~~MAY 14 1980~~

10C 212000
decorative arts

HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
CENTRAL LIBRARY

subject 7104



